

Regeneration and Transport

Progress Report of Councillor A Andrew, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder

Regeneration and Transport Services

Services within my portfolio are vital to all those who live and work in Walsall and those who visit. Despite some early signs of economic recovery, Walsall, like most of the UK, is continuing to face unprecedented economic challenges which are having a significant impact on our businesses and people. Transport services make a vital contribution to the local economy and serve as an important catalyst to aid its recovery. They are essential to enable efficient travel around the borough in a way that is both safe and convenient. Pollution control is vital to the quality of life of residents in general and to their health in particular. Close coordination between this and traffic management is essential due to the impact of road traffic to noise and air quality within the borough.

My housing and planning services are crucial to ensure that residential sites are brought forward for development that reflect local need, maximize the investment into the Borough and increase its attractiveness as a place to live. Housing services also help look after some of those with the greatest need in our community through emergency accommodation, helping people stay in their own homes and with other support.

After a dip during the recession planning application numbers are starting to increase and more than ever needs to carefully balance the need for new development with protecting the environment and produce the best quality environment. Our property services maintain the building assets we need to deliver the right services, in the right places, to the community of Walsall.

Plans and Strategies

Achievements in the portfolio in the last year have been many and varied. At the strategic level these include the development of the Black Country City Deal, which promises new freedoms and flexibilities from central government, with better access to funding to allow us to make real progress on economic outcomes, getting the right sites and infrastructure for businesses, supporting competitiveness, training more people and helping people move off welfare.

Walsall is providing strong support to the development of the Black Country LEP's Strategic Economic Plan which will assist opening access to the Government's single funding pots, including Regional Growth Fund, BC Business Property Investment Programme, Growing Places Fund, Green Shoots and Black Country Gold of £38m for the Black Country. This includes a very exciting and valuable opportunity for the Black Country, the European Union's new funding programme for the six year 2014–2020 period. Government have agreed to place as much of this funding as possible at local LEP level, which for the Black Country amounts to £152million of new money. To access this new money, we have to submit a LEP EU Investment Strategy in January 2014, setting out the Black Countries priorities for this funding against the key areas of:

- Innovation
- Business Competitiveness
- Carbon Reduction

- Employment & Skills
- Social Inclusion

My staff are assisting by providing leadership in the development of the project pipeline and the joint drafting of the strategy. It's my intention that this new money will help to really drive forward our economy, by supporting business growth and local people into work.

In planning my policy team held a successful consultation on the Issues and Options stage of the Sites and Allocations Document and the Action Area Plan for Walsall Town Centre. Similar work on district centres will follow to give the detailed planning certainty and opportunity that developers need, and that the community want, on the future shape of the borough, planning for jobs, housing, leisure and open spaces, community uses and much more. We have also modified our supplementary planning documents on design and the natural environment to reflect changes locally and in national guidance and our affordable housing SPD is nearing completion to support development whilst ensuring a contribution towards affordable housing.

The Black Country LEP has recently prioritised its major transport schemes for 2015 to 2019 and submitted these to government for consideration. These include the development of a scheme for M6 Junction 10 and one for Aldridge station coupled with electrification of the line. I am actively involved in these matters as vice chair of the Black Country Strategic Transport Board.

With the Walsall Economic Board I have supported the development of a business led plan for the economic development of the borough, capturing their contribution to prosperity, working closely with the Council.

Headline Delivery Achievements

Economic Development and Delivery

Moving on to the achievements driven by this strong policy context the highlights include further progress on the delivery of the Black Country Enterprise Zone. The development of closer relationships with landowners has enabled sites to be brought forward and funding has been secured to undertake site investigations to better understand likely barriers to development. At the same time a Zone wide financial model is being prepared to agree and define Black Country LEP investment priorities to target public sector intervention into key sites. The Zone is being marketed widely to potential investors supported by work undertaken by Black Country Investment and through materials such as the BC EZ brochure, highlighting the key benefits on offer.

The key Old Square redevelopment in Walsall town centre will see the delivery of a new Primark and Co-op store on the site of the former Tesco building. Development is due to commence in early 2014 with completion and opening planned for early 2015. The opening of the retail development will also coincide with the delivery of a new, permanent home for Walsall Market. Feasibility work has already started on this project and a planning application is proposed to be submitted in April 2014.

In the same area of the town centre, Norton & Profitt are progressing their plans for a new £12million retail scheme in Digbeth. The council has agreed to transfer its land interests to the developer to enable this scheme to proceed, creating up to 200 new jobs.

The town and district centres management team are supporting more comprehensive and effective plans for the centres, bringing together the work of many services in order to reduce duplication of resources and provide a service that is fit for purpose and meets real customer needs.

This year a number of bespoke projects based on intelligence gathered from both businesses and the public. Such projects include a joint initiative with the private sector to reduce notorious vacant units in Walsall Town Centre that successfully attracted seven new businesses that would otherwise have not invested in Walsall and filled units that had been void for a number of years. In addition to securing new business rates and the creation of jobs, neighbouring businesses have confirmed an increase in footfall and a new mix of visitors which could sustain businesses collectively in the longer term.

The successful district centre In Bloom project attracted private sector support through their investment in addressing historic environmental hot spots throughout the centres, resulting in gold and silver awards. In addition, a number of marketing tools have been delivered to raise the profile of the Town and District Centres. For example, the Walsall Town Centre Night Market launched in October 2012 attracted over 1,500 visitors of which a high proportion were from out of the borough. The benefits of this event resulted in a wealth of positive comments around the town centre, dispelling negative myths around poor quality and fear of crime. Those businesses that participated in the event were impressed with its management by the Council reinforcing Walsall as a good place to do business and invest.

On Walsall Waterfront South the £30m Jessup housing scheme was completed in December 2012. This landmark housing scheme saw the award winning development provide 322 canal side homes, securing a total of £15m Homes and Community Agency funding. On Waterfront North the £10m 100 bed Premier Inn was completed in November 2012 which has been further complemented with the grant of planning consent for a new leisure led development adjacent to the hotel which includes for a cinema and retail developments.

In the Walsall Gigaport area of the town centre, the new Tesco store continues to trade well and in June 2013 a further leisure led development, featuring a cinema anchor tenant, was granted planning consent on the adjacent site.

Following the intervention to purchase land within Walsall Gigaport, work is continuing to bring forward the former Noirit site at the corner of Hatherton Street/Littleton Street for office uses and the Council continues to support the developer and occupier in their pursuit of public sector gap funding.

The Council has agreed to dispose of its asset at Lime House in support of Walsall College and its proposed major investment in the 'Walsall Business and Sports Hub'. The benefits expected from the scheme include 466 jobs annually supported by new businesses supported by the hub (2033/34), creating £61m of gross value added into the economy. Furthermore, an estimated 3,240 apprentices will have been trained in the Hub, of which approximately 2,500 will be in employment in 2033/34.

Recent planning consents include that for a £100m investment to create a resource recovery and renewable energy facility off Fryers Road in the Birchills Leamore ward. Building the facility will create approximately 250 construction jobs over three years with 50 permanent jobs once operating.

Walsall Works continued to help young people into work through assisting businesses to provide more apprenticeship places. To date we have supported 201 young people into apprenticeships and 198 into pre-apprenticeships. We have also supported nearly 300 young people into other positive outcomes in Walsall and outside the borough through, for example, non-subsidised apprenticeships, employment and further education. In the past year from the period April 2012 to July 2013, there has been a reduction in Jobseekers claimants from approx 3500 to 2570. There appears to be directly linked to Walsall Works and the reduction as the rate of reduction is much faster than the other three BC boroughs.

In the 12 months from July 2012 to July 2013, we supported 59 Walsall businesses in procurement with public or private clients, and seven investors approached the team directly asking for support to identify local suppliers/contractors. Of those opportunities, 9 businesses successfully won 10 contracts worth a combined total of £204,000. The team also supported five businesses create or safeguard 20 FTE jobs.

The new Employment Growth Team is now in place in Regeneration. Working closely with teams across the Council and with partners, including Invest Black Country, the team will look to maximise employment opportunities for Walsall, resulting from economic growth and investment.

This all demonstrates how attractive Walsall is a location for investment – we are open for business. Whether it is the high levels of customer care and business support we give to new and indigenous businesses through our business friendly planning approach and our renowned one stop 'Development Team' approach, the 'soft landing package' we offer to foreign direct investment or through grant programmes or public sector financial incentives and partnerships we aim to ensure that all development is undertaken in a way that creates and protects the environment we all desire to live in.

Transport

Particular mention should be made of the Darlaston Strategic Development Area access project where site works commenced in February. A Compulsory Purchase Order has been published and if all objections received cannot be resolved then a Public Inquiry will be held. This project will help stimulate major investment in new employment opportunities benefiting the borough in general and the Darlaston area in particular.

Regarding HS2, we are working with Centro to ensure that the existing local rail network is upgraded and good connections are achieved to ensure the benefits are fully realised for Walsall businesses and residents alike.

I am leading on a review of operations within the Town Centre with the aim of improving its appearance so making it more attractive to shoppers and investors alike. The review of car parking within Walsall town centre has progressed and, working with the private sector, we will shortly be bringing forward options to improve both the quality and location of spaces. Following the Cabinet decision to introduce reduced car parking charges in January of this year, I am pleased to report an increase in the amount of all-day parking.

A major concern in the borough is inappropriate parking on verges and the Council has recognised this by allocating £250,000 to carry out schemes over the next year in consultation with Area Partnerships.

Turning to highways maintenance, we are responsible for over 500 miles of highway; we have delivered some 90 carriageway maintenance schemes over the last year, treating a total length of 16 miles, and 58 footway schemes involving a length of more than 15 miles. The overall expenditure over this period was around £7.5m. The Department for Transport allocated Walsall some extra funding to carry out specific maintenance with the aim of encouraging economic growth whilst supporting local communities.

I recognise and indeed share the frustration caused by the effect of works by the various utility companies on Walsall's roads but can reassure members that my officers carefully coordinate all works with the aim of minimising disruption to the travelling public. For example, the recent major South Staffordshire Waterworks mains renewal works at the Finger Post junction in Pelsall will be quickly followed by extensive resurfacing along Wolverhampton Road.

Following Cabinet's recent consideration of consultation results on proposals for the replacement of York's Bridge in Pelsall, a planning application has now been submitted for what will be an important upgrade to the road infrastructure in this part of the borough.

With regard to street lighting, we have implemented two 'invest to save' projects, in Bloxwich and Leamore, where new LED lighting has reduced operating costs and carbon emissions. A business case for a third phase in Brownhills has been prepared and is currently being considered.

The mobile enforcement camera car has completed testing and, after a period of issuing warning notices, went live this month. In the Wolverhampton Street West and Hatherton Road bus lanes alone almost 250 contraventions were recorded during a five week trial period during the Summer. The car will also be used to assist schools to deal with parking around school gates.

My team has implemented a number of road safety improvement and sustainable travel schemes during the year and, working with schools and Walsall College, has again promoted road safety amongst young people. There has been a successful initiative with the health service to tackle childhood obesity and, with the new role of the Council in this regard, further initiatives are planned. It was pleasing to note that there was national recognition for the Council's A*Stars initiative.

There is a lot of interest in the '20 is Plenty' initiative and the team is reviewing all existing zones with the intention of implementing pilot schemes later this year to assess the contribution to road safety together with the potential costs.

As winter approaches, we are gearing up to ensure the winter service again operates at a high standard to keep the roads clear and safe for motorists across the borough.

Turning to the pollution control service, my team has investigated 600 environmental complaints in this period and continues to regulate over 100 companies through the Environmental Permit regime. The team has also secured significant government grant funding to support the West Midlands Low Emission Towns and Cities Programme which is reaching an advanced stage following the consultation processes.

Housing

Delivering on key Regeneration housing sites is a major priority within the Housing Strategy and the good news is the majority of these named sites (covering approx 600 mixed tenure homes) are either on site or have been completed, namely:

- Brownhills High Street completed
- Whitworth Close Darlaston nearing completion- the first energy efficient timber frame development in Walsall
- In Goscote, Well Place has been completed, and Barracks Lane is on site
- Wood Street Willenhall - currently under construction with timber frame houses
- In Moxley, Curtin Drive is on site, and Harrowby Road is about to commence

The first Big Switch (energy switch) took place earlier this year where more than 100 people switched. On average people who took part achieved an annual projected saving of more than £150. Overall, this led to a saving of nearly £17,000, and has raised awareness of the benefits of fuel switching considerably. Building on this success a second round has been launched which closes mid October.

A dozen households have now purchased their first home through Walsall's new Local Authority Mortgage Scheme.

Changes to council tax charging mechanisms, and work of the dedicated Empty Homes Officer have brought over 400 empty homes back into use.

We are unlocking a number of stalled housing sites through committing £1.4m New Homes Bonus to kick start 8 developments that will provide 320 homes and create or safeguard up to 300 jobs. This programme will unlock a total of £30m of housing investment in Walsall.

Nearly 400 (393) Disabled Facilities Grants were approved and nearly 300 (297) completed, which is an improvement on last year. We have reduced time from referral to approval from 44 weeks 2 years ago to 8 weeks and reduced average costs from almost £10,000 two years ago down to £6,500 – meaning we can help more for the same money.

Investment from March 2008 to the end of December 2012 will have totalled over £30M in home energy / insulation and tackling fuel poverty. The Council is currently seeking to appoint nominated Energy Company Obligation (ECO) providers to deliver ECO and Green Deal works to the private sector from October 2013, with the intention of attracting up to £20m ECO investment to help the fuel poor. (The funding mechanism changed at end of 2012 from CESP to 'ECO' and there has been minimal new works whilst an approach has been formulated. We have now issued an Invitation to Apply (ITA) for Eco providers to become the Council's Nominated contractor /s)

Earlier intervention to prevent homelessness and provide an 'end to end' offer for customers needing help with their "money, home, job" has resulted in a 50% increase in homeless preventions to 1600 households receiving prevention advice and assistance.

We have responded to the challenge of value for money services that are efficient and effective such as the latest stage of restructuring the Planning Development Management section now organised around two area based teams, north and south integrating planning enforcement, which has seen significant improvements in how we deal with breaches in planning control and derelict / void property.

Property

In Property the office rationalisation strategy saw the milestone of the refurbished Civic Centre completion, providing more efficient, better quality work space but crucially allowing far greater numbers to occupy the space thereby allowing the phased closure of other office sites across the Borough. The reform of how we manage property contains apace with the service taking total responsibility for all property matters across the Council. With the Serco transfer we successfully brought over managing and maintaining property assets including on behalf of schools and have ensured continuity of services to customers.

Conclusion

Investment in economic development, transport, housing and environment is fundamental to making Walsall a great place to live, work and play. Despite the ongoing economic challenges we continue to see considerable achievements providing a basis for optimism about the future. Despite the obvious challenges Walsall has sustained a steady stream of investment over recent years across the Borough; in part due to our external reputation as a Council that is open for business and which is focussed on making things happen. The attraction of investment, the creation of new jobs, the retention of existing jobs and the continued emphasis on the up-skilling of Walsall people will provide a stimulus to Walsall's wider economy, and will help reduce the burden on a range of Council support services.

We are committed to improving our transport networks, our housing offer, our planning and environmental conditions and providing an estate which helps front line services deliver the best possible services. All the many varied elements within my portfolio are vital to the health and wellbeing of the people of Walsall but also contribute to the growth and development of Walsall's economy and protection of the environment. This is challenging, in times of unprecedented financial restraint but the performance of my services shows that we are making real progress towards these goals.

Councillor A Andrew – Deputy Leader of the Council
Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Transport
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