

Council – 10 July 2017

Report of the Leader of the Council

National Issues

This report is presented to Council at a time of unprecedented uncertainty in national Government. Having called a General Election three years before the end of the Parliamentary fixed term, with the intention of increasing the Conservative Parliamentary majority, the outcome was great uncertainty for the country. Having lost its majority, the Government has had to abandon significant parts of its manifesto. Plans for the expansion of grammar schools, aspects of financial planning have changed or disappeared. The Government's cap on public sector pay appears to be under review. All of these and many other areas have the effect of creating uncertainty for local government, making financial planning more difficult.

Changes in Ministerial Office holders inevitably brings with it the inevitably brings with it the prospect of different approaches to policy and practice. Under David Cameron and George Osborne, there were clear signals that devolution of functions and budgets would continue. Under Theresa May and Philip Hammond this is far less certain. It may be that devolution remains a Government aspiration but the absence of a Parliamentary majority and the challenges of negotiating Brexit, have reduced its priority.

The Council

The Labour Group committed itself to developing longer term financial planning. Over the last year, we have had to take many difficult decisions. There are many more to make in the years to come.

The 2016/17 financial year saw continued reductions in Government funding and increasing costs across all of our public services, none more so than in the areas of Children's and Adult Social Care. The cost of providing Adult Social Care looks set to rise over and above our ability to raise income, that means we will need to reduce our costs by transforming the way we deliver our services. An ambitious programme of change lies ahead, funded by a £3 million transformation fund.

Looking backwards since 2010, £160 million of savings have been implemented. Despite having to make these, the Council is in a positive stable financial position. This has been achieved through strong financial discipline, forward planning, and a robust budgetary process which set our financial plan over a four year period. The result of this discipline meant that in 2016/17 the Council ended the year with a small operating underspend of £0.448 million, a healthy balance sheet, with balance sheet ratios improving all the while.

There is some uncertainty with the omission of the Finance Bill from the Queen's speech as to whether the Business Rate Retention scheme will continue beyond the present financial year. Ministers are currently considering their approach to 2018-19 and, more widely, how best to deliver their manifesto commitment to allow local government to keep more of the money it raises.

The rewards of capital investment in regenerating the Borough are beginning to come through. Completion of the Primark and Co-operative developments within the town centre has stimulated further developments with new retail outlets expected to come on stream in 2017/18. Business rate yield is up nearly £9 million. New investment opportunities have presented themselves which will require significant capital expenditure. These will provide regular revenue returns used to support our services; further capital expenditure will be required over the next two years to unlock the potential of land at junction 10 of the M6 which will bring new businesses and jobs into the Borough.

Adult Social Care

Adult Social Care is embedding locality teams across Walsall and beginning to work much closer with GPs and primary healthcare. The directorate has recruited some additional capacity at the Team Manager level and remodelled their Advanced Practitioners roles to focus on front line staff development, support and improved practice outcomes for service users. The recent changes to the Resource Allocation Panel has seen changes in practice that have delivered significant reductions in the cost of care across all adult client groups, whilst ensuring that service users needs are being met in accordance with the Care Act. This helped the directorate to achieve a significant under spend in budget at year end.

The directorate has invested in more front line Social Workers and Occupational Therapists, to ensure they can work with more people at an earlier stage, and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions, and/or escalation of care needs. The new posts will shortly be going out to advert. The directorate has also invested significant resources into up skilling the professional workforce, particularly in relation to Approved Mental Health Practitioners and Best Interest Assessors. This investment will ensure the Council is able to meet its obligations in terms of the Mental Health Act and the Mental Capacity Act. It will also help strengthen our Adult Social Care response to mental health across Walsall, so that people have easier access to services, when at the time they need them most.

Children's Services

The 2016 results contain areas of strength compared to national averages. In particular, outcomes in Walsall for Year 1 Phonics, Key Stage 2 Writing and Key Stage 5 applied and technical qualifications are all above national averages. There are gaps in achievement, compared with all children, for pupils with special educational needs, those who are looked after and those eligible for free school meals, to a varying degree, depending on Key Stage. These have been main areas of focus for 2016-2017 and will remain so until the gaps have narrowed.

Published Ofsted judgements on school inspections since December 2013 have shown an improving trend. The percentage of schools judged as good or outstanding shows an improving trend from 65.5% in 2013 to 84.6% in June 2017. The national average is 88.8%. We aim to meet and surpass the national average over the next two academic years.

Both the Education Challenge Board and Special Education Needs and Disability Board hold the education service areas to account to improve outcomes by monitoring, evaluating and reviewing performance. These Boards are independently

chaired and will continue during the next year. A move towards a sector led improvement model will continue which will further hold schools to account. Clusters of schools are working well together to support and challenge each other while sharing good practice, resources and innovative developments in teaching and learning. The role of the local authority is key to enabling brokerage, a focus on improvements and accountability while ensuring all children are safe, happy and learning well.

Pressure on budgets continues to reflect the number of children and young people that need help from the Council and to secure their safety and wellbeing. The administration will ensure that funding matches need and continued to provide extra resources during the last financial year.

Libraries

As part of the budget savings for 2017/18, my Cabinet agreed to significantly redesign the borough's Library Service. The Council has retained the Central Library in Walsall and five District Libraries (Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall), reflecting the vital role our district centres provide in the Borough. Streetly Community Library will be augmented by volunteers and completes the statutory service. The redesigned Lichfield Street 'Hub' will offer visitors far more than the current building and will bring vibrant new life to a tired facility. As well as lending, reference and children's books there will be a modern café, free wi-fi, an ICT lounge, a learning resource centre and jobs & skills development resources. The refurbishment will also see the Local History Centre & Archive relocating from its current site in Essex Street into a bespoke re-designed space once occupied by the EM Flint Art Gallery. The 'Hub' will also offer extended opening hours.

The other libraries retained as part of the Council's statutory library service at Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall will also see service improvements, via the installation of an access control system later in the year. This will enable the libraries to be open for more hours than they currently are, thus making them more available to people who may not be able to access them during normal working hours.

We remain in active discussions with a number of community groups about services which may be provided from the locations where libraries have now closed.

Transport

The Council has worked with the West Midlands Combined Authority transport arm (Transport for West Midlands) and West Midlands Rail Ltd to positively influence the bidding for the West Midlands Rail Franchise, in particular the reinstatement of a Walsall – Wolverhampton passenger rail service and direct links from Walsall to London. An application has been made to Network Rail's 'New Stations Fund' for a new station at Willenhall to coincide with a possible new service during the upcoming franchise period (2017-26). We are also pursuing plans to better link our Darlaston Enterprise Zone sites and surrounding areas into the local rail network.

Plans are also well-advanced to deliver our £65m highways improvement at M6 J10 in partnership with Highways England, which together with other recent highway

improvements in Darlaston and Pleck, will also support better local highway access to key development sites.

Locality Model

We are working on developing the locality model for the Borough further and will be updating/consulting further with Members on this in July/August, with a view to commencing with the 4 new Strategic Locality Partnership Boards in mid to late September. Partners are embracing this supportively and with enthusiasm.

Voluntary Sector

The Council has invested a considerable amount of money to support the re-birth of One Walsall. This investment has seen a stabilisation of the Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Organisation and now its growth to a significant partner with the Council. We are in year two of its three year recovery journey and I am extremely confident that it will succeed. As valued partners the Voluntary and Community Sector will help meet some of the challenges facing the Borough and we will continue to build a more professional relationship with organisations within the sector including appropriate leasing and delivery arrangements.

Councillor Sean Coughlan
Leader of the Council
3 July 2017