

Council – 16 April 2012

Transport and Environment Progress Report of Councillor Ansell, Portfolio Holder

Services within my portfolio are vital to residents, commerce, shoppers, parents and employees throughout the borough.

Transport services are essential to enable efficient travel around the borough in a way that is both safe and convenient. We are responsible for over 500 miles of road and manage 58 car parks. It is important for the Council to prioritise the service for the benefit of the whole community.

Transportation makes a vital contribution to the local economy. We are working closely with the Local Enterprise Partnerships, the Integrated Transport Authority, and nearby Councils to promote regeneration and economic success. Indeed, transport is identified as a key issue for the new Black Country LEP which is in discussions with the Department for Transport (DfT) on a new approach to future funding for major schemes. A key factor is to ensure that there will be effective cross boundary coordination and joint working with adjacent LEPs. The agreed priorities are:

- improvements to motorway junctions
- improved accessibility to Birmingham airport
- network efficiencies and congestion management
- reinstatement of the Walsall to Stourbridge freight railway

'High Speed 2' has been approved and our attention must turn to improving the existing network in and around the borough to ensure benefits are fully realised for businesses and residents alike.

In December, the DfT approved the Darlaston Strategic Development Area project. The key objective of the scheme is to help stimulate major investment in new employment opportunities benefiting the area and the borough. The overall cost estimate is £26.5m including a DfT grant contribution of £14.3m.

A West Midlands bid for Local Sustainable Transport Fund support, amounting to £35m, was submitted to DfT in December. This project will include infrastructure improvements and 'smarter choices' for transport. Anticipated outcomes will include economic regeneration and reduced carbon emissions.

All planned Red Route and Bus Showcase schemes have been completed, most recently the section along the Broadway.

18 of the Council's car parks are within Walsall town centre accounting for 1300 out of a total of 5300 spaces. There has been a review of car parking, both private and public, within the town centre to identify options to improve the quality and location of spaces. We have consulted with local businesses and discussed the review with a scrutiny panel working group. We are always looking for ways to improve our service to the public and I am pleased to be able to tell you that paying for car parking by mobile phone will be introduced this year.

A new Highways Maintenance Strategy has been developed and recently received Cabinet approval. This sets the method and standards for all works on the highway to meet our priorities.

The Highways Maintenance Contract has now been operating for nearly three years and we have seen significant improvements in the service provided – and this has been commented on favourably by residents. During the year we have completed 35 resurfacing schemes, reconstructed 8 miles of roads and 5 miles of footpaths and repaired some 2500 potholes, using new and improved techniques in partnership with Tarmac. A further 20 miles of road received preventative treatment. In all, £6.5m has been spent on highway maintenance. This was supplemented by the DfT and the Council to help address the extra damage caused by the severe recent winters of 2009 and 2010.

Following the successful Lean systems review in 2010, where cost savings of £400,000 were delivered, we are now reviewing the operation of the highways maintenance service as a whole using the Vanguard method as part of the Working Smarter programme to ensure continued improvements.

There continue to be cases of metal thefts affecting the highway network, the most recent of which saw the police arrest two individuals who had a van of 18 stolen gulley covers. In an attempt to combat this, we have replaced some with hinged covers and experimenting with other materials.

As with all Councils, Walsall's roads have been affected over recent years by works carried out by the utility companies. Recent examples include the major gas works in the Pelsall area and the water main replacement in Walsall town centre. I can reassure members that my officers carefully coordinate these works to minimise disruption to the travelling public.

The performance of the winter service last year deserves special mention for the way in which the team worked so hard to keep open the Borough's roads during such severe weather.

The Variable Message Signs at the entrance to Walsall town centre have been operational for some time now and were well used during the winter to warn motorists of icy conditions. They have also assisted in directing traffic during the motorway closures and major incidents such as the fire at Jabez Cliff at the Arboretum Junction.

My team has implemented a number of road safety improvement and sustainable travel schemes during the year and, working with Walsall College, has again promoted road safety amongst young people. There has also been a successful initiative with the health service to tackle childhood obesity.

The public lighting PFI agreement is about to achieve a decade of successful operation and we have just started to implement an 'invest to save' project in Bloxwich, where new LED lighting will reduce operating costs and carbon emissions whilst needing less maintenance.

Significant progress continues to be made across our environmental services as well. We further increased our recycling rate to 49% putting Walsall at the top of Metropolitan Borough Councils in the country.

We have reviewed the way we remove fly tipping as part of the Working Smarter programme and have reduced the time taken to remove fly tipped waste from an average of 13 days down to 3 days per occasion.

We have restructured our front line workforce within Street Pride to create a multi-functional workforce that can be deployed on waste collection, street cleansing or grounds maintenance activities. This allows us to prioritise our resources more flexibly and improve our service to the customer.

The Waste to Energy project with Staffordshire County Council is progressing and construction has now started. Deliveries of waste are expected to commence in late 2013. This will ensure our waste is diverted to create energy, thereby avoiding costly and environmentally damaging landfill disposal.

The new Brownhills depot has a biomass boiler which runs from wood chippings derived from the maintenance of our trees within the borough which is more energy efficient, reduces cost and generates savings.

Walsall Council became a lead Local Flood Authority last April and received new responsibilities including the need for a Flood Risk Assessment. Members will be pleased to know that Defra have commented favourably on its quality and have held it up as an example for other councils to follow.

We all know that contaminated land is a legacy of the borough's industrial past. We have recently commenced the preparatory work that will see the Broadway West Playing Fields brought back into use as a playing field. We have also formally declared the former Willenhall Town Gasworks site as contaminated land - the start of a legal process to remediate the area at the earliest opportunity.

Investment in transport and the environment is fundamental to making Walsall a great place to live, work and play. We are committed to improving transport networks and environmental services that support the growth and development of Walsall's economy and protect the environment. This is challenging, in times of unprecedented financial restraint, but the performance of our services shows that we are making real progress towards this goal.

Councillor T Ansell

**Cabinet Member
Transport & Environment**