

Council - 9 January 2012

Leisure and Culture - Portfolio Holder's Report

The services under this portfolio are some of the most high profile provided by Walsall Council and I am pleased to be able to report important achievements so far this municipal year with more to come in the next few months.

In spite of budget pressures, there have been no closures or the loss of opening hours at any library in Walsall. In fact, there has been investment in the service with the purchase and implementation of Radio Frequency Identification technology. This will provide self service facilities and improvements in the management of book stocks. The new system went live at the Central Library around Christmas and will roll out to the other six main libraries before the end of March.

Construction of a new library in Pelsall is now well under way as part of an exciting project incorporating a surgery and Children's Centre. It is expected to open to the public next summer.

The library service ran another successful children's Summer Reading Challenge during the school holidays. 3,330 children were involved, the largest number ever involved and this resulted in 177 children joining the library.

Walsall adults and young people made more than 130,000 visits to Forest Arts Centre to participate in cultural activities. On average the Forest engages 8,500 young people every week in music and the arts during school terms. For the third year running, the music team was judged to be "outstanding" by a recent government review.

During 2011 a major partnership project, The Home of Metal, was held in the Black Country. The project, celebrating the Black Country as not only the place where heavy metal music was born, but also the metal industry in the region, involved the Leather Museum, the New Art Gallery and the Creative Development Team in a series of exhibitions and family events. As part of this programme The Leather Museum displayed some of the amazing leather costumes from the band Judas Priest and the New Art Gallery exhibited the work of Mark Titchner who was inspired by the region's metal working heritage.

The New Art Gallery reduced its opening hours to 5 days per week from April 2011 by closing on Sundays. In spite of this, visitor figures have remained good. It is projected that around 175,000 people will have visited the New Art Gallery this year.

The Turner Prize 2012 nominee Karla Black's work was exhibited at the New Art Gallery in the autumn and fellow nominee, George Shaw's work is included in the exhibition "There is a Place" which will launch in January 2012.

Of particularly local interest, Graham Benton, a local artist, had an exhibition of his paintings on show at the New Art Gallery in October, entitled "From St Ives to Walsall".

Walsall Adult and Community College launched an apprenticeship scheme in partnership with Social Care and Inclusion and the Integrated Young Peoples' Services

in July. Plans are in place to recruit over 150 apprenticeships in Social Care, Youth Work and Activity leadership.

The College was awarded a performance bonus of £135,000 by the Skills Funding Agency in November in recognition of its high performance. This additional funding will be applied to support young offenders and the transition of young people from care to take up learning and apprenticeship training.

Customer satisfaction amongst College students improved from 99.7% in 2010 to 99.8% in 2011.

The College was awarded a Prince Charles Foundation Trust Business in the Community Award for supporting employees in applying the principles of environmental sustainability in the workplace and the College Principal was awarded Green Leader status by Sustainability West Midlands in October 2011 for leading environmental sustainability awareness in the College and in Walsall Council.

Like-for-like attendances in our leisure centres are up by more than 3% despite difficult trading conditions. This reflects both the Council's ongoing support of key activities, such as free swimming for under 16s and subsidised swimming for over 60s. Indeed we are working with our partners to put in place arrangements to continue with these important subsidies in the longer term. The increased attendances also reflect our continued investment in facility improvements. Key improvements made this year are the renovation of the Brine Pool changing rooms and the new Dance Studio, both at Gala Baths, plus the extension to the fitness suite just completed at Oak Park. All of which is good news when it comes to the crucial issue of addressing the problems of health of our residents throughout the borough.

The year also saw the successful transition of Bentley Leisure Pavilion from Council operation to community management, delivering a significant saving to the Council whilst securing the future of this community asset. The Old Hall People's Partnership are to be commended for their work in delivering this.

The Outdoor Pursuits team have continued to develop their services to young people with disabilities, securing in excess of £100,000 of external funding for services and facilities for young disabled people in Walsall.

Major work was carried out at Streetly crematorium throughout the year. State of the art mercury abatement equipment was installed to meet new government requirements and the opportunity was also taken to replace the three existing aged cremators. I am pleased to be able to tell you that disruption to the bereaved was kept to a minimum throughout.

The 'Tell Us Once' scheme in the council's Register Office was launched in October. This new facility is an excellent new initiative which takes a lot of bureaucratic issues away from the public in what can obviously be a difficult time. At the point of registering a birth or death the informant can take up the opportunity of using this scheme and our systems will then confidentially and securely inform a number of council services and government departments of the event. Clearly this means that the bereaved in particular do not have to inform several public agencies of a death. This is another example of working smarter for all concerned.

Hot meals for schoolchildren remain a priority for the Council which has outlined its commitment to ensuring schoolchildren continue to receive nutritional meals. Consultation showed significant support for the council's catering service and head teachers, NHS representatives, education and catering services staff are working together to help shape the service's future. We understand the importance of a hot meal being available for school children in Walsall particularly given the strong links between good diet, health and educational attainment. The council wants to put into place a model that protects meal provision and involves head teachers in the process. This is an exciting opportunity for health, education, social care and leisure professionals to work together to develop a scheme which can further benefit our schoolchildren. In partnership with NHS Walsall we launched a three year Food Dudes programme at a number of primary schools in September to help encourage children to eat more fruit and vegetables. Funding will enable up to 9,000 children to participate in the programme.

I am delighted to say that Walsall Council has retained its three Green Flag Awards for Palfrey Park, Willenhall Park and Merrions Wood. These offer high quality green spaces which are well-regarded by residents and visitors alike.

We can't afford to stand still though and improvements have been delivered across the borough with a number of important projects. These include the improvement and extension of the play area on Pelsall Common, starting the £400,000 construction of a new 'green' pavilion at Palfrey Park, the refurbishment of Blackwood Park Pavilion, improvement of facilities at Rushall Park, regeneration of Kings Hill Park not to mention, of course, the continued progress on the Arboretum refurbishment. Work on the bandstand, boat house, ladies bowls pavilion, lakeside shelter and community garden have been completed. Further works are now underway including refurbishment of gates and railings, repairs to the boundary walls, installation of new benches, bins and signage, new tree and shrub planting and demolition of the Broadway toilet block all of which will be complete by next Summer. All in all, this year alone, and in addition to funding for the Arboretum refurbishment, we will have successfully secured over £522,000 in external funding, much in partnership with Walsall's Friends and User Groups enabling the delivery of 35 capital improvement projects across the Borough worth in excess of £3 million pounds.

The first half year of the municipal year has been a very successful one for the services in the portfolio, achieved in increasingly difficult times, and with the clear prospect of more good news to follow as 2012 gets underway.

I am extremely grateful to all the officers and support teams that have been able to translate my aspirations into actions that ensure our communities enjoy the highest standards of service. I may be the public face of the Portfolio but they are the engine room that makes it all happen. There are many challenges to come and, with the team I have, we cannot fail.

Cllr A Harris
Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture
22nd December 2012