

Council – 7 November 2011

Regeneration Portfolio Holder Update

Purpose of Report

To provide an overview of the Regeneration portfolio, with particular reference to the current context for regeneration in Walsall with key achievements in the portfolio over the last year. This will also include an outline of some of the key priorities and challenges for the portfolio in the current year and for the future.

Context

Walsall, like most of the UK, and indeed the wider world, is facing unprecedented economic challenges which are having a significant impact on our residents, businesses, and the places we live.

The current economic circumstances add to the challenges that our borough already faces - low skills; an economy over reliant on traditional sectors; an underperforming private sector; high levels of worklessness and a historical lack of investment in the borough particularly in our key centres over several decades.

The completion of the borough's first local economic assessment (LEA) has given us a comprehensive in depth understanding of our economy including the value of sectors that the Council has not previously understood. This will enable us to address identified issues and crucially an ability to focus on those things that will unlock future economic opportunities for growth and job creation.

In the last year we have also seen some significant changes in the external environment, including the impending closure of the Regional Development Agency Advantage West Midlands and the closure of Walsall's Urban Regeneration Company despite the disappearance of these organisations interest and investment, old and new, has continued in the Borough and some may argue has been more speedy because of a more streamlined decision making process – the council rather than other organisations.

The formation of a new business led Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) for the Black Country has already had a positive impact on the Black Country and our Borough with the recent announcement of the Enterprise Zone (EZ) in Darlaston and Pleck. Walsall in this organisation is at the table from day one and the Leader of the Council is the Vice Chairman of the LEP.

Regeneration Portfolio Purpose

The core purpose of the Council's regeneration strategy is to ***create conditions for sustained economic recovery and growth, by supporting the growth of companies and jobs in Walsall, ensuring that people have the skills and the environment to make the most of these opportunities.***

The approach for our customers will be to:

- Help customers to get, keep and stay safe, secure and well in their home
- Deliver new and improved homes to increase your housing choice.
- Help you live independently and affordably in your own home.
- Help you if you encounter difficulties with your housing or your landlord.
- Deal with your planning applications quickly and efficiently.
- Improve the physical environment of the place you live.
- Adopt a 'business friendly' approach to managing future development in the Borough.
- Create and improve our buildings to enable council staff to deliver better services for you.
- Ensure that the Council's land and properties are used to help stimulate investment in your borough not always just taking a capital receipt. .
- Assist you in developing the right skills and experiences to obtain employment.
- Help your business to thrive and grow and to assist in establishing new businesses.
- Develop schemes, in partnership with transport colleagues, to help you move around the Borough and tackle congestion.
- Help provide the right sites and premises to enable your business to thrive and grow and to help attract new businesses.
- Improve you're the long term future of town, district and neighbourhood centres.
- Improve day to day management of town, district and neighbourhood centres through the Town and District Management Team.

Review of achievements

Despite the current economic challenges there have been some considerable achievements over the last year, which provide a basis for optimism about the future.

It is fair to say that despite the obvious challenges Walsall has sustained a steady stream of private and public investment over recent years across the Borough, very much due to improved external reputation of the Council and our attitude that we are open for business and on focussed on making things happen for the citizens of our Borough.

A brief overview of achievements across the portfolio over the last year are outlined below.

Delivering new homes; improving housing choice and supporting people to live in their own home we have:

- Invested £6.5 million in 2010/11 in improving, adapting and making safe 676 homes for some of our most vulnerable residents through;
 - Government Disabled Facility Grant £1.219M
 - Council Capital Programme £1.262M
 - Regional Housing Pot £4.019M
- Successfully secured and invested £30.7 million of Homes & Communities Agency (HCA) funding used to deliver 587 new affordable homes in the Borough.
- Invested £1million in modernising our services for homeless households including refurbishing Sandwell House for homeless families and Rivers House for homeless young people.
- Successfully enabled the £7million Kickstart 2 funding which saw Walsall become the 2nd largest funded local authority in the country and largest in the region. Kickstart was awarded by the previous Government, and the current Government committed to meet the residual commitments.
- Successfully enabled £10.5 million of funding from Kickstart 1 programme.
- Become the first local authority in the Black Country to create a Local Investment Plan in partnership with the HCA.
- Successfully bid for and managed £110,000 from Government to work with those who are live in severely overcrowded accommodation. This has led in the last year to 95 families being re housed to more appropriate accommodation.
- Developed a regional Landlord accreditation scheme which has led to over 1000 private landlords in the region becoming accredited.
- Completed nearly 200 major adaptations (work costing over £1.500 per property) to the homes of disabled residents.
- Invested £1.2 million on a Health through Warmth scheme to help address fuel poverty and associated health issues for over 600 households in 2010/11
- Invested £5.5 million in a Community Energy Savings Programme (CESP) investment in Blakenall area in partnership with CENTRICA (£3.5 million in social rented sector and £2 million in private sector)
- Created a unique HMO Health Worker post funded by NHS/WHG from the Health and Housing fund to increase health access and uptake by vulnerable tenants in houses in multiple occupation.
- Responded to 373 requests for assistance received from tenants in the private rented sector, leading to action taken to rectify Category 1 and Category 2 hazards in properties.
- Prevented over 700 households from becoming homeless through a range of initiatives including Rent Guarantee Scheme and a Mortgage Rescue Scheme.
- Eliminated the use of bed & breakfast in all but emergency situations.

Delivering planning services that are both customer focussed and business friendly:

- Determined 83.3% of all planning applications within 8 weeks
- Completed 87% of searches within 3 working days
- Investigated 76 Dangerous structures within 1 hour of notification including out of hours
- Improved the building control service so it continues to perform highly in a competitive environment dealing with 100% of Building Regulation applications within statutory targets
- Successfully worked with the other Black Country Council's in completing and gaining secretary state approval for its Joint Core Strategy, the largest plan of its type in the UK. in order to meet challenging deadlines and
- Invested in our Local Land and Property Gazetteer, whose team were winners of the National Land and Property Gazetteer 'Exemplar Awards' for being the best in the west midlands region.

Managing the Council's assets and buildings in a way which helps improve services for customers and supports Regeneration:

- Invested, working in partnership with Education Colleagues, over £100 million of Government and Council funding improving education facilities including Academies and new primary schools.
- Invested £7 million in a new Council depot, funded through the disposal of the old depot site which addressed a long standing liability.
- Generated £2 million of income from sale of Council assets – to support the Council's capital programme and to facilitate regeneration schemes
- Delivered significant savings by using a smart energy contract across our buildings.
- Saved nearly £2 million in rate rebates on Council property
- Developed the Smarter Workplaces programme to consolidate and improve the Council's core office estate to enable Working Smarter and creating better working environment for the people we employ.
- Attained the Carbon Trust Standard
- Delivered a range of improvement projects, including the Central Library; extension to Elmwood Special School; Gala baths and the Schools Access Initiative Works £500k.
- Initiated work on options for Community Asset Transfer.

Developing approaches to support local businesses to grow; create employment and to assist local people to access opportunities:

- Completed our Local Economic Assessment (LEA) to develop a detailed understanding of our economy and a route map to improve.
- Organised 4 (Jessop's x 2, Pelsall Library and Darlaston Academy) Think Walsall Meet the Buyer Events, together with maximising the local company participation in the development of the Walsall Arboretum, which together have generated £5.3million of new business for Walsall companies, safeguarding 52, jobs and creating 13 new ones.
- Attracted £225,000 of new investment into the District centres, supporting 67 new projects, including £136k of section 106 monies secured for Willenhall, which has improved the visitor/shoppers experience through better lighting, environmental and

road improvements; Improvements to Aldridge Shopping Centre in partnership with LCP, completing a £40k makeover.

- Launched and invested £100k per year to deliver a new Walsall Town Centre Management programme with continued support for the flagship District Centre Management programme.
- Through the Working Neighbourhoods Programme supported 5,284 people, including supporting 1346 people into work and opened 4 One–Stop-Shops to support an additional 3500 people.
- Ensured that the Darlaston Transport Scheme, working in partnership with Transport Colleagues, made it into the Department of Transport Development pool, which if approved would release £30million to fund infrastructure improvements to unlock a portfolio of development sites.
- Engaged with over 1100 businesses, who have secured almost £2million of direct support as a result; including grants from our WNF programme to improve security, reduce business crime, and to assist new businesses to start up and continue; together with grants from AWM, through their Business Investment Programme.
- Invested in Walsall.com, a one stop business support website receiving over 20,000 hits per month.
- Secured over £3million of ERDF to support a range of projects including extending our one-stop-shops into Walsall Town centre, Darlaston, Caldmore and Bloxwich and delivering a Workwise programme that assist people to travel to work during the early stages of employment.
- Launched a £300,000 Walsall Business loan fund with Black Country Re-investment society.

Developing the right sites and premises to support future growth and improve our town and district centres:

- Supported the completion of the Waterfront South phase 1 in March 2011, which delivered 158 residential units and 6 commercial units created. Phase 2 is currently underway with 164 residential units. The total investment was over £60million and the developer, Jessops, worked with the Council to employ local labour and apprentices from Walsall College. Many Walsall businesses benefitted from the supply chain due to the Think Walsall programme and meet the buyer event.
- Facilitated and closely negotiated with the owners to deliver the development of the £21 million first phase redevelopment of Old Square. This has recently secured planning permission bringing Primark to the town centre and Co-op returning to the Town Centre. The scheme will create over 100 plus jobs, diversify the retail base and .will improve footfall in the town centre. It has already given other investors more confidence in investing in the Town.
- Secured the demolition of the infamous Overstrand, opening up views of St Mathews church.
- Supported the completion of a £60m Tesco anchored development which opened in December 2010, creating 200 new jobs..
- Supported the development of a new headquarters for Walsall Housing Group to kickstart office development in Walsall Gigaport.
- Supported the development of a viable scheme for a £10m 100 bed Premier Inn hotel on Walsall Waterfront, with construction now underway.
- Supported the completion of the £16million Bentley housing project which delivered 125 homes and included Council funded public realm improvements.

- Supported the completion of £11m Goscote Dementia and Palliative care units.
- Initiated work, that should have been undertaken by the URC, on a new Town Centre Framework as a tool for marketing and promotion of Town Centre opportunities and to support a new statutory plan for the Town Centre.
- Undertook a pro-active acquisitions & demolition programme to enable future development of strategic sites in the town centre.
- Led on the development of a Business Friendly Planning & Development Charter to ensuring a business/investor friendly approach to help attract new investment.
- Continued to improve the Markets service.
- Delivered a range of local improvements including schemes in Pleck and Walsall Wood to enhance local neighbourhoods.

Looking forward

Whilst impressive progress has been made, the Council does not underestimate the economic challenges ahead.

Over the coming year we will be focussing on a range of interventions to try and secure economic recovery and growth; to create opportunities for Walsall people; to improve housing choice; to support our local businesses and to improve our town and district centres. These will include:

- Increasing the supply of homes across all tenures and increase the supply of existing homes through addressing empty properties and under occupied homes.
- Enabling 100 new affordable homes in the borough – unlocking stalled schemes through the use of New Homes Bonus.
- Maximising the opportunity through Accord's LOCAL project creating low cost sustainable timber frame homes from a new Council supported production facility at Beechdale.
- Facilitating a single Choice based lettings scheme used by all housing association partners.
- Continuing of Health through Warmth schemes and a £4 million Community Energy Saving Programme (CESP) likely to be focussed on Birchills.
- Develop a Black Country Strategy to maximise delivery of Housing Retrofit
- Continuing to modernise the homeless service, specifically housing advice and options services, to better meet the needs of our most vulnerable customers.
- Understanding and respond to changes in the housing benefit system.
- Improving our Asset Management approaches to ensure the Council's assets are used most effectively and surplus assets are sensitively disposed of, including progressing options for Community Asset Transfer.
- Developing a new Total Facilities Management approach to reflect future customer needs.

- Delivering Smarter Workplaces, to create a new office environment to enable Working Smarter and the delivery of substantial year on year savings.
- Developing our successful 'Think Walsall' approach to ensure local businesses and people benefit from future development in the borough.
- Launching a new approach to inward investment with Marketing Birmingham and the Black Country Council's to attract new investment and support existing businesses wishing to re-locate and expand.
- Developing approaches to addressing the increasing risk of Child Poverty.
- Completing an Economic framework to guide future economic recovery and growth.
- Continuing to improve our existing successful approach to Town and District Centre Management, with the aim of attracting new investment; addressing vacancy levels and improving the customer/visitor offer.
- Launching a new business led Walsall Enterprise Board, to ensure greater business involvement and leadership.
- Continuing to support the delivery of the priorities of the Black Country LEP.
- Understanding and responding to the specific needs of our Strategic Companies who have the potential for future growth.
- Developing a quality portfolio of sites and premises in our target sectors in response to business and investor demands, including a greater emphasis on key employment corridors such as Redhouse and Green Lane.
- Ensuring that the Black Country Enterprise Zone which is focussed largely on Darlaston is a success and that key sites within it such as Phoenix 10 are appropriately brought forward for development.
- Focusing on unlocking development schemes that have stalled in recent years, through the creative use of initiatives such as new Homes Bonus; ERDF and our own land assets.
- Focusing on the continuing delivery of our 'Big 3' development opportunities in Walsall Town Centre – Waterfront; St Mathews and Gigaport;.
- Continuing to improve our business friendly planning and development approach.
- Focusing on improving planning and building enforcement.
- Ensuring we have a planning policy basis to support future growth, through the progression of a site allocations plan developed with intelligence of the market and the Area Action Plan (AAP) for Walsall Town Centre.

This is a challenging agenda, but one we should all face with confidence and enthusiasm given the prize is an improved, more economically resilient borough in which there will be more and better opportunities for our diverse communities.

Councillor Adrian Andrew

Deputy Leader and Portfolio holder for Regeneration