

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council



Introduction

We listened to our residents and made pledges for the borough to be *Safer, Stronger, Cleaner and Greener*. Specifically;

- We will work with the police to keep our communities safe
- We will invest in our communities supporting both young and old – providing a level playing field for voluntary and community organisations to access funding.
- We will not rest in our obsession to keep Walsall clean, fining the flytipper, and publishing a ‘wall of shame’ for those who are caught on camera
- Creating well used spaces that are welcoming and attractive and environmentally sustainable.

Our Council Plan sets the priorities for the Council, with our aim is that, *Inequalities are reduced and all potential is maximised*.

Together we are committed to developing a healthier, cleaner and safer Walsall and creating an environment that provides opportunities for all residents, communities and businesses to fulfil their potential and thrive.

As Leader of Walsall Council I oversee many services including, finance and financial planning, our transformation programme, policy and strategy, communications and commissioning. I lead our engagement with the West Midlands Combined Authority, Black Country Joint Committee, Association of Black Country Councils, West Midlands Leaders and relations with our members of parliament and national government to get the best for Walsall.

Our aim, priorities as well as our approach and commitment to deliver these priorities for the people of Walsall was acknowledged by the Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken by the Local Government Association at the start of the year.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council

Our Service Delivery

Financial planning

Walsall Council, as with all local authorities, continues to experience significant financial challenges and I present this report against a backdrop of continuing economic uncertainty, at local and national level.

We face continued economic pressures due to increasing inflation, cost of living increases and the residual effects of Covid on our residents and our businesses. Covid has significantly affected the retail sector, on top of the pre-Covid shifting patterns to more of an 'online' presence, and is changing the traditional shopping experience, with the closure of several retail outlets in the town centre affecting business viability and resident experience.

The latest Medium Term Financial Outlook (MTFO) position showed a balanced budget for 2023/24 and 2024/25 and a gap of up to £20m by 2026/27. This included £15.7m of savings for 2023/24 and further to that, the carried forward non-delivered 2022/23 savings of £7.5m. Given the inflationary pressures on pay and prices, cost of living and funding uncertainty, these gaps will almost certainly increase during the year as we review the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

This continues to mean the future financial environment is very challenging. We are uncertain on the direct funding implications for the years beyond 2023/2024 so assumptions have had to be made in our MTFO around predicted changes to Government spending and Local Authority grant levels. The promised Local Government Fair Funding review has been delayed again and financial uncertainty remains a key concern. The sooner we get a multi-year settlement, the more stability we can gain and better planning for the medium to longer term.

The Bank of England continues to apply increases to the base rate due to continuing high inflation in a bid to reduce inflation and bring the base rate down in the medium term. The current outlook is that it could go as high as 6% before reducing to around 3% over the next 3 – 5 years. In recent months, fuel and food costs have dropped but this has only balanced out the increasing pressures in air fares, recreation and culture costs and car inflation. This has caused CPI to remain at 8.7% and core inflation to hit a 31-year record high at 7.1%, causing commentators referring to the UK as having stagflation: that is stagnating growth but high inflation.

A lot has been done to reduce the energy impact caused by the Russia / Ukraine conflict, and European supplies have increased and the ability for Europe to deal with its own demands has increased significantly. The position should improve over the medium term but unfortunately, we are behind the US and the Eurozone on dealing with inflation.

We do not have capacity in our mainstream budgets to fund significant inflationary costs. For every 1% on our pay bill, it will cost us £1.4 million each year on top of increasing costs from our staff heavy suppliers. In all, we are facing a more difficult and complex economic environment. In the absence of any increases in funding,

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council

then these costs will need to be met through further savings and increases in income above and beyond those already planned. This will require some focused scenario planning and difficult decisions as we set the strategy for the medium term and set our budget to deliver the key outcomes of the Council.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

We have again set a balanced budget for the new financial year and for 2024/25 and delivered a balanced outturn for 2023/23, despite significant financial pressures, especially adults and children's social care – delivering efficiencies and new delivery models to achieve the Council's outcomes. We have agreed new strategies for Treasury Management and investments and Performance Management Framework.

Our accounts remain unqualified and were one of the first in the country to be settled with an excellent Value for Money report by our external auditors. We continue to deliver our Strategic Asset Plan and our strategic approach to capital projects and investments.

We have successfully delivered the Single Accountable Body functions for the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership, including EZ, Growth Deal, LPIF and core funding, estimated at almost £400 million over its lifetime. Now this arrangement will be undertaken by the WMCA, we have retained the legacy funds including the EZ funding, so will continue to see the remaining projects through to the end.

The accountable body team also includes Town Deal and connected gateway schemes and all projects have been through our governance process, Town Deal Board and Cabinet, and are all underway after been approved by DLUHC.

Communications, Marketing & Brand

Our new Communications Marketing & Brand (CMB) structure is complete and sits within the Hub. In a fast-changing media landscape, CMB engages with the growing number of online news websites along with journalists from traditional media outlets. In the last year, more than 222 press releases were issued, equivalent to more than 4 media releases every week.

The team manages the Council's core social media accounts engaging online with thousands of residents every day. Following a review and revamp of the Council's intranet, Inside Walsall, staff and member engagement levels have increased. On average there are more than 115,000 views of Inside Walsall every month. A set of priority campaigns have been developed and delivered to support the ambitions set out in Our Council Plan. These include raising awareness of the Borough's regeneration ambitions, We Are Walsall 2040 and Walsall Connected.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council

In a year of unprecedented Royal events, CMB supported the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, events surrounding the death of the Queen and the Coronation of King Charles III. Corporate consultations are delivered through CMB. During 2022/23, the views of more than 14,300 people were collected, analysed, and used in the Council's decision making. Print & Design, another function that sits within CMB, completed around 2300 jobs during the last year.

The team also now manages Council advertising with the aim of maximising income through advertising on Council-owned assets. The Council is advertising on 15 bin lorries and on 45 roundabouts. Digital advertising has been launched on the Council's website and further opportunities to generate income through advertising are being developed.

Business Insights

The Business Insights team went live in January 2023, and is close to being fully established. This has benefited from centralised expertise and skills in delivering insight and intelligence to deliver better outcomes, as well as building resilience in this specialised area. The Business Insights team has worked closely with each directorate to understand their intelligence and insight needs and identify opportunities for better use of the information we hold to improve outcomes for our citizens.

We are embarking on a data and insights strategy, to ensure the organisation and wider strategic partnership are based on better understanding of need and demand, and outcome focussed. The new Business Insights Service has already delivered insight to inform our Walsall 2040 strategy, family hubs need assessment, and serious violence needs assessment, demonstrating the ability to provide thorough, intelligence-led insight to drive effective strategic planning and decision making.

Emergency Planning

To keep our residents safe our Emergency Planning team work to ensure that if major incidents happen, they have as small an impact as possible on the Council and our communities. Examples of the incidents we prepare for include flooding, severe weather, major transport, accidents, industrial accidents, terrorist incidents, and outbreaks of disease, such as COVID 19. Our preparations include:

- ❖ Assessing local risks.
- ❖ Writing and reviewing emergency plans.
- ❖ Training and exercises with other key organisations.
- ❖ Providing advice and guidance to business and schools; and
- ❖ Ensuring we have plans in place to deliver essential services during an emergency.
- ❖ We also help to support the emergency services and other organisations with their emergency response, including:
- ❖ Arranging emergency accommodation and transport.
- ❖ Providing information to the public; and
- ❖ Leading on recovery following an incident.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council

We provide this as a key partner of the West Midlands Local Resilience Forum. This is the multi-agency management group for the co-ordination of emergency planning within the region.

Our Strategies

Policy & Strategy

The Policy & Strategy team drives our strategic intent for the borough. Going live in late autumn 2022 and the team has the capacity and knowledge across strategy and policy development, performance, and behavioural science. The team has engaged across the Council with services to determine a 2-year work programme to ensure that they are enabling the Council to deliver against its strategic framework.

Since it formed, the Policy and Strategy Unit has led the We are Walsall 2040 engagement and strategy development programme, and the 2040 strategy was approved at June Cabinet- this was a hugely successful engagement with over 8k residents, communities and businesses and will act as the key strategic framework across the borough for years to come. The team are currently identifying existing strategies, programmes and projects that will deliver against the vision in the 2040 strategy and identifying gaps to ensure we can develop new approaches, and we are also reviewing our partnerships to ensure they are effectively aligned to deliver and provide accountability against the 2040 framework.

Our policy officers are leading and supporting a range of strategies including a new Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion strategy, Children's Strategy, Serious Violence Strategy and VCS Commissioning framework and strategy as well as identifying where the Council is compliant against our policy and strategy framework to ensure we have the right policies and strategies to meet our statutory requirements.

On the performance side, the Policy and Strategy Unit is working with colleagues in Business Insights to review the range of indicators and information we will use for next year to monitor delivery against our Council plan and have led the Council's recent successful LGA Peer review process. This will enable officers and Members to have a better understanding of where we are delivering against the Council plan.

Our behavioural scientists are working with and across services to understand behaviours behind why people do or don't recycle, contamination rates and how we might encourage people to do more, as well as supporting Adult Social Care in using behavioural techniques when communicating with service. They are also working with Children's to support a behavioural approach to infant feeding and the work of the new Family Hubs. Over the next year they will be exploring opportunities to bring a behavioural lens to work in public health and to look at some of our internal ways of working.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council

Our Projects

Transformation & Digital

Transformation and Digital services continue to support the council on its Proud journey of transformation, helping to embed a culture and ethos to not just deliver changes once, but to continuously review and improve what we do, to make it better for our customers, better for our staff and more efficient. The investments we have made in the technology strategy and the solutions available to users is opening more opportunities to do this.

We have a wealth of data and information in our IT systems and are learning to analyse this to better understand our customers, residents and businesses, their needs and how to best deliver them.

The team provides business change support in the form of business analysis and project management capacity, helping to deliver the Proud Workstreams, one of which includes delivering a consistent and effective point of contact for customers through the Customer Experience Centre via the telephone or through digital means through the website where customers can self-serve. Internal support services are also being reviewed to ensure they best meet the needs of front-line teams, whilst keeping the Council compliant.

Digital and Technology Services (DaTS) provides support for Enabling Technology workstream, looking after the council's IT systems and networks, making sure they run smoothly and access to them is available, never more important than now as we are delivering a 24/7 service. We have invested in the technology we use, both to support services but also to provide our staff with the technology tools they need to do their jobs, such as MS Office and MS Teams. DaTS also ensures that systems remain safe and secure, placing a priority on managing the security of systems and data as cyber-attacks continue to be an increasing threat.

The Proud Workstreams and their projects contribute to continuous improvement to achieve three Proud promises. Transformation and Digital provides a corporate Programme Management Office, providing the project and change management capacity to help the business to transform and deliver customer focused ways of working. The key Workstreams are:

- Enabling and Support Services – delivering support services effectively through alignment of ways of working for HR, Finance, DaTS and Legal.
- Adult Social Care Continuous Improvement Programme – addressing the changes required to deliver Adult Social Care provision effectively and efficiently.
- Enabling Communications and Culture – ensuring our staff feel supported and have access to support and development opportunities and have a voice.
- Enabling Technology – underpinning technology infrastructure to support transformational change using digital solutions, providing self-service opportunities, and building data and insights to help shape future service design.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council

- Commercial Workstream – driving through opportunities to generate income for the Council and review charging.

The Transformation and Change Team will continue to provide project and change management capability to the Proud Workstreams and provide a level of assurance and governance to the council that change is being managed effectively and outcomes are delivering benefits. The team will also roll out the management solution it uses to track projects, so that all major council wide projects can be monitored and tracked.

Through the difficulties the team has experienced in the recruitment and retention of staff, they are focusing on “growing their own” talent through investment in apprenticeships and providing training and support to enable our own staff to progress in their careers in DaTS and Transformation & Change.

Further customer and staff surveys are planned for 2023/24 and will assess perceptions around Council services as more services move online digitally and services are consolidated into the Customer Experience Centre. We will also assess how employees feel, as Organisational Development and Workforce strategies are implemented.

Reducing paper is a key focus, and the Digital Records Project is underway to remove paper files and documents stored across Council offices, scan them, and enable data to be retrieved electronically, leading to a more efficient way of managing records.

As part of the Technology Strategy, Walsall is building a core technology platform, which will provide integration to many of the key systems to enable data to be extracted for analysis and business insights, Customer Relationship Management capability and end to end digital processes to offer improved customer services and to find all customer enquiries to be held in one portal. The website has been refreshed, we are now looking Inside Walsall and how the Intranet can better serve the needs of the internal services.

We continue to invest in cyber security to protect the organisation from external threats which would interrupt services if the IT systems became unavailable.

We have worked with our WMCA partners to negotiate a new deeper devolution deal for the West Midlands with central government. This will be coming to cabinet for approval in September. The deal will secure new and significant longer-term funding agreements, including 100% business rates retention for 10 years, worth £450 million to the region. The West Midlands will benefit from a departmental-style arrangement with a single pot of funding. This will give local leaders more control over spending on devolved areas.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council

Future works

Future Priorities and Areas of Focus

My administration is aiming to secure a balanced two-year budget and financial strategy in February 2024. We continue to deliver PROUD transformation that improves on customer experience and staff satisfaction whilst delivering efficiencies in how we deliver those services. Where we do need to reduce services in the future because of our funding position, then we will link all our services to the Council Plan outcomes in the first instance and proactively determine where we need to spend our money and explain why we are doing so.

Prospects for our residents and local businesses are being improved by the delivery of a set of employment, skills, and business support programmes, which are vital to strengthen our workforce and business base to meet the ongoing challenges, driving success in our local economy.

My administration is taking forward the Walsall Town Centre Masterplan, Future High Streets Connected Gateway Programme, and the Town Deal Programmes for Walsall and Bloxwich. These will secure a brighter and more prosperous future for our town and Borough as a whole. Work also continues to bring forward important employment sites such as Phoenix 10, further setting the pace for recovery.

We continue to work closely with the region, including the Black Country and the West Midlands Combined Authority. The Association of Black Country Authorities (ABCA) continues to provide the forum for Council Leaders and Chief Executives to co-ordinate political and managerial activity of common interest.

Over the next few months, we are shifting from development of the We are Walsall 2040 Strategy to implementation and delivery. Work is already underway to identify existing programmes, strategies and initiatives across the borough that support the achievement of the outcomes within the strategy and the identification of gaps. We will be considering the key milestones along the journey towards 2040 and will be continuing to tell the public about our plans.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Leader of the Council

Thank you

Thank you to all the staff in these key areas of focus, they are the invisible teams who keep the wheels of council business moving and are often invisible until something goes wrong. Thank you for keeping our services going.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Mike Bird". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned below the portrait photograph.

Cllr Mike Bird – Leader of Walsall Council