

Council – 10 January 2011

Leisure, Culture and Environment Progress Report of Cllr Harris, Portfolio Holder

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.

Significant progress continues to be made in all our environmental services. In particular, our pledge to invest in the clean and green agenda to make the borough a more attractive place for residents has been delivered with improved cleaning of town and district centres and increased enforcement in relation to persistent environmental crimes such as littering and fly tipping.

We have been confirmed as the most successful metropolitan authority for recycling in 2009/10 with a recycling rate of 47% and have successfully introduced zonal working for waste collections providing further improvements to this vital service across the borough. Proposals for new waste disposal contracts are due to be presented to Cabinet this week and will provide an annual saving of around £1 million compared with existing contracts when they start in 1 April 2011.

Violia has been selected as the preferred bidder for the Waste to Energy project in Staffordshire and construction is scheduled to commence in April 2011 with a view to coming on stream in 2013. This will ensure our residual household waste is diverted to create energy, thereby avoiding costly and environmentally damaging landfill disposal.

Construction work at the new depot site in Brownhills is well underway and is on schedule for an opening in April 2011.

Palfrey Park and Willenhall Memorial Park retained their highly valued Green Flag status and Merrions Wood achieved Green Flag status for the first time. Walsall's tree management service has been singled out for praise by the Arboricultural Association competition for excellence.

Advance contract works are due to commence in the Arboretum in the next few weeks as part of the £7.5 million refurbishment of this historic and much loved park. A new youth play area, skate park and multi use games area have been completed in the park ahead of schedule and are proving very popular with young people.

Proposals for a new Country Park next to the Arboretum were approved by Cabinet in December, which will provide an exciting addition to the areas of countryside available to the Walsall residents

The government has commended our air quality team for the draft Air Quality Action Plan it produced for Chuckery and we successfully applied for grant funding on behalf of the seven West Midland authorities to assist in the development of a regional wide Low Emission Strategy.

To emphasise our commitment to improving air quality, we are replacing the three cremators at Streetly Crematorium with state of the art equipment which will ensure the efficient and environmentally friendly operation of the crematorium for many years to come.

The Walsall Adult and Community College's new way of working started in August 2010, a key milestone in the college's evolution. The College has been graded as 'good' in the first Local Authority Ofsted inspection to take place in the country under the new inspection framework and this reflects well on the Council and everyone that has worked so hard to get where we are. One of the key areas of work which the college will be leading on in 2011 is the development of an Adult Learning Plan. This will be a borough wide strategic plan for adult learning to identify the learning needs of local communities and the provision we need to address this.

More Walsall people are actively participating in sport thanks to a number of initiatives including the continued provision of free swimming for the under 16s and over 60s, the Fit For A Fiver scheme which provides subsidised gym membership in targeted areas of the borough, Fun For Life which tackles childhood obesity and the ever popular Summer Sports Camps.

Our cultural services continue to set standards for others to follow. The New Art Gallery continues to attract large numbers of visitors and was named 21st in a list of 50 cultural attractions throughout the UK compiled by The Independent newspaper confirming its standing as a national attraction.

Bookmark Bloxwich, the fully remodelled library and theatre, was officially opened in December and represents a key milestone in the ongoing programme of investment in the borough's main libraries.

Walsall Leather Museum has successfully retained its VAQAS Award for the ninth year in a row. This Award is the benchmark for UK tourism attractions.

The Forest Arts Music Service recently hosted a Government Inspection and not only sustained its "outstanding" status but also achieved increased standards in all categories. The Annual Christmas Show at Symphony Hall, Birmingham took place in December involving 2,000 young people performing to audiences of 5,000. This prestigious show is regarded as a cultural highlight in The West Midlands and was again a great success.

The Creative Development Team received a 'Certificate of Commendation' from the Royal Society for their Walsall Arts and Health Partnership Projects work. The theme was the contribution of the creative arts to addressing health inequalities. As a consequence of this, we have been asked to present our Walsall health work at an international conference in Dublin 2011 and the presentation will include a case study of the team's work with Walsall taxi drivers.

Looking to the future, we have begun work on a health and well-being review in partnership with the NHS which will help us to better understand the role our leisure centres can play in tackling health problems in the borough.

We will shortly start building the new library at Pelsall, sharing space with a surgery and children's centre facility, which is due to open in 2012. We have also begun to look at the re-provision of our library services to make sure they keep pace with current circumstances and the ever changing demand from our residents.

Contracts have been awarded for the £300,000 Water and Inclusive Play project at Willenhall and King George V Playing Fields and it is anticipated that the new facilities will be officially opened in time for the Easter holidays.

More Green Flag awards are anticipated in relation to the Arboretum and Barr Beacon and we will begin to see the transformation of the Arboretum as the main contracts for the restoration get underway in the coming months.

We will be looking at new ways of Working Smarter with particular emphasis on street scene services such as grounds maintenance, tree management, street cleaning, parks and refuse collection as we continue to strive to achieve more with less.

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 2011 gets underway.

Cllr A Harris

Cabinet Member
Leisure, Culture and Environment