

## **Council – 7 January 2013**

### **Leisure and Culture**

#### **Progress Report of Councillor 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.

Following a successful beacon lighting ceremony to mark Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Accession Day in February, work commenced on the 'Raising the Barr' project to restore Barr Beacon's historic features and community pride.

Barr Beacon became the first urban Local Nature Reserve to receive the designation of 'Dark Sky Discovery Site', whilst over 3,000 people were in attendance Stargazing Live at the New Art Gallery in conjunction with the BBC.

In February, Caroline Spelman MP, Secretary of State for the Environment, visited Moorcroft Wood to announce that Birmingham and the Black Country had been become one of just 12 pilot Nature Improvement Areas across England. This aims to increase the wildlife value of the area and involve local communities.

Delivery of Walsall Country Park and the Grange tree-planting scheme continues while Merrions Wood has been awarded a Green Flag for the third successive year.

The restoration of the Council's premier park, the Arborertum, is almost complete. Improvements carried out in the past year include new footpaths; repairs to boundary walls and fencing; new bins and benches; horticultural improvements, new planting; refurbishment of the tennis courts; new and improved lighting and installation of infrastructure to support an Illuminated Park.

The final phase of work, the new Visitor Centre, is due to commence at Easter and will be complete by 2014.

Work has also started on replacing the lido with an interactive water play feature which will be completed by Whitsun.

Usage of Walsall's green spaces continues to increase and an extensive programme of improvements to other parks across the borough has been carried out including completion of Palfrey Park pavilion, the laying out of a Heritage Art trail linking the Town Centre to Willenhall Memorial Park to Fibbersley Nature Reserve, improvements at Ross Farm North in partnership with the Friends Around the Lea, refurbishment of fencing and gates at Bentley Cemetery using the Community Payback team, and improvements to the play area at Pelsall Common. Alongside this, ongoing support is being provided to 16 Friends and User groups to continue the long tradition of community involvement in Walsall's parks and green spaces.

Willenhall Memorial Park and Palfrey Park successfully retained Green Flag status. Proposals are well advanced for two new replacement leisure centres at Oak Park and Bloxwich. This work is long overdue; Oak Park is almost 40 years old and parts of the Bloxwich centre are 83 years old. Walsall residents deserve better and this scheme aims to offer them the opportunity to improve their activity levels, health, social interaction and general quality of life. The Oak Park proposal received full Planning Approval in December and a bid to the Sport England Lottery Fund for up to £2m of grant funding has been submitted.

The new library at Pelsall will open at the end of the month as part of the exciting new Pelsall Village Centre which will provide surgeries for four GPs, community health facilities, a library and a Children's Centre for local people. The new building will provide a focal point for everyone in the community and will improve local access to services.

Libraries have been able to open Pheasey and New Invention libraries on additional days by using local volunteers to support staff replacing library staff. The volunteers fulfil a number of roles and have not replaced library staff. Their role is to meet and greet visitors, facilitate additional events and activities, assist people to use internet based services, return library materials to the shelves and act as positive advocates for the library service. Volunteers will also be working in the new Pelsall Library.

Walsall was the only authority in the Black Country to be successful in a bid to host an event by the Children's Laureate, Julia Donaldson, at Bloxwich Library in October. Four local schools were invited to send their Year 2 classes to the library to hear her performing her stories with their help on stage. Each school performed a prepared song or poem for her to hear. This was incredibly inspiring as well as entertaining for the 145 children and 20 adults who attended the event.

Learning from their Working Smarter review, Libraries are addressing barriers to employment by setting up three work clubs in New Invention, Pleck and Willenhall libraries. These clubs provide one-to-one help in CV writing and job searching skills using computers. A very valuable partnership between Libraries and Job Centre Plus is helping to support job seekers in local libraries.

Self-service facilities have now been successfully introduced into Walsall's six major libraries – Central, Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall. It will also be available in the new Pelsall Library.

The New Art Gallery has been shortlisted to host the prestigious Turner Prize in 2015. A decision is expected some time this month.

The Gallery is also experiencing a large increase in visitors wishing to see the exhibition of work by controversial artist, Damien Hirst. This exhibition will run for a year and finishes in October 2013.

The Leather Museum has received record numbers of visitors in 2012 with the total expected to exceed 40,000 for the first time. Use of the museum by schools has increased and the events and activities programme has proved very popular. The newly refurbished café has also been a big hit with visitors.

Following a national competitive bidding process, Forest Arts Service was awarded the status of Regional Music Education Hub, starting last August. The hub will work closely with partners to deliver excellent music tuition in schools across Walsall and to develop career pathways for young people.

Forest Arts Centre taught over 8,000 pupils each week in schools during term time plus 3,000 pupils weekly in ensembles, bands, orchestras and choirs.

The Creative Development Team continues to support an ever increasing range of activities of importance to local communities throughout the borough. This year, it has been working with Libraries, Local Area Partnerships, Children's Centres, and Looked After Young People. Other work addresses anti smoking, parenting training, local heritage, local festivals, cohesion work, cancer awareness, mental health, well being and sexual health awareness. The team also supports local groups to bid for arts, culture and heritage funding which has included the local Civic Society, local forums and community groups for programmes worth nearly £1,000,000.

Walsall Adult and Community College has continued to progress its commitment to excellence in learning. Learner satisfaction with the service they receive is 99.8% and over 90% of employers we work with told us the training we provide is making a real difference in their company performance. The College was awarded a prestigious international Green Gown Award in November in recognition of our work in business excellence for sustainability. In December, WACC underwent a short-notice Ofsted Inspection and was awarded Outstanding status in all assessment categories, the first College in the country to receive this level of achievement in an Ofsted inspection.

Last year was 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 2013 gets underway.

## **Councillor A Harris**

Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture

19 December 2012