

## **Council – 9 January 2017**

### **Report of Councillor J. Fitzpatrick, Portfolio Holder, Community, Leisure & Culture**

It gives me great pleasure to be able to give Council this report outlining the successes that have happened within the Community, Leisure & Culture portfolio over the last year.

#### **Sport & Leisure**

In Sport & Leisure the Mayor and I were very pleased to be able to welcome His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester to officially open the Bloxwich Active Living Centre on 23 November. This marked a major milestone in this council's philosophy to get *"more people, more active, more often"* and continues my predecessor's hard work in this area.

The two centres represent a transformation in the range and quality of provision. Both Bloxwich and Oak Park are performing extremely well with more than 7,500 visits to each centre each week; three times more than the centres they replaced. We will organise the official Opening of Oak Park for the spring once the Oak Park 3G artificial Grass Pitch is complete in March 2017.

In June we also re-opened the improved Gala Baths with the installation of a new pool boom to create a teaching pool, a new sauna, and remodelled reception and changing facilities. Initial trading has indicated a substantial increase in usage and income from the refurbished centre; with the first month recording a 55% increase in income compared to pre-refurbishment.

Darlaston Swimming Pool has also seen an increase in attendances, probably off the back of the Active Living Centres opening in August.

#### **Libraries**

In Libraries we have delivered a number of successes including in reading and literacy – by giving access to high-quality books and reading materials, electronic resources, magazines, newspapers and e-books. We have designed activities to get and keep people reading, such as the many reading groups or author visits, like Elly Griffiths, award-winning crime writer.

We aim to improve the digital skills of residents in Walsall offering computer taster sessions and one-to-one help with tablets, CV writing and other tuition, such as how to use E-Bay.

We also work children and families and offer a number of parent and toddler groups, Cradle Clubs, under 5 groups, Lego clubs at Brownhills, Pelsall and Pheasey and a Coding Club at Aldridge library.

The 'Big Friendly Read' was the most successful Summer Reading Challenge yet: 3,600 taking part. An Arts Council-funded project, "Early Hurley Burley" providing music and theatre for 0-3 years olds was a great success, and over 50 families from Bloxwich, Walsall Central, South Walsall and Pelsall benefited from it.

## **Bereavement**

In Bereavement and Registration officers undertook a two month period of extensive public consultation between 1 February and 31 March. This gave all residents and stakeholders the opportunity to comment on the proposed new Rules and Regulations. This helped the Council to fulfil its commitments relating to its core aims and values, operational commitments within this sensitive service as well as standards of maintenance. A number of improvements were made to the service and all were incorporated into the Rules by Cabinet in June.

## **Register Office**

In July the Register Office introduced a Nationality Checking Service. This service is a partnership between us and the Home Office UK Visas and Immigration. The Register Office team ensure that applications for citizenship are completed correctly and submitted to the Home Office with the appropriate supporting documents. The service is proving popular and is generating additional income for the Council.

## **Local History Centre**

On the 25 November 2016 the Local History Centre held an exhibition to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Centre in Essex Street. The exhibition included a book of photographs of Walsall taken throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century including its people and buildings, railways and steam trains, canals, barges and narrow boats. Copies of this book will be on sale to the public.

## **Walsall Leather Museum**

I am pleased to report that the Walsall Leather Museum was awarded a "Certificate of Excellence" from Trip Advisor for the fourth year in a row. The museum is currently ranked 14<sup>th</sup> out of nearly 450 "things to do" in the West Midlands, and ranked number 1 in Walsall.

Funding from the Saddlers Company enabled the purchase of several top quality, high security, new showcases for the museum's exhibition gallery. The launch exhibition, featuring part of the celebrated Hodson Shop clothing collection from Willenhall, has been extended to run for longer in response to its popularity with visitors.

## **New Art Gallery**

The New Art Gallery developed and delivered a major solo exhibition by British artist Mat Collishaw ending in January 2016. The exhibition received positive coverage from visitors and was widely reported in the national press. The Shop did well, selling 28 limited edition prints and a range of books on the artist.

In February 2014, The New Art Gallery received a donation of 200 artworks from Birmingham-based collector Clive Beardsmore. This is the largest single donation to the Gallery since the Garman Ryan Collection in 1973. Alongside two Epstein drawings, Clive's gift included pieces by Hockney, Sutherland and Vaughan.

As part of a three year partnership project with Tate we borrowed 16 masterpieces from Tate's renowned collection in 2016 and paired them with related works in the Garman Ryan Collection. This display has been incredibly popular with the public.

## **Forest Arts Centre**

Forest Arts Centre has had another successful year and this included the official opening of the A3 Arena at a launch event on 21 July. The Arena is a specialist hall for large scale arts activities, show development, professional rehearsals, film production, aerial performances and circus arts. Supported by Arts Council England this will be a key facility for Forest's future.

## **Community Safety and Cohesion**

The team has continued to support Walsall and its residents through some challenging times following further counter terrorism related arrests, court cases and events. We have countered negative media interest by demonstrating the cohesive spirit generally displayed across the borough, culminating in September's #Love your Neighbour day. This was delivered with the support of partners at minimal cost to the Council. It is important that events and opportunities that celebrate a positive message of the cohesion that exists within the borough is promoted.

## **Love Your Neighbour**

The Love Your Neighbour initiative started within Birmingham churches that began to work together to show unity against discrimination. The brand promoted the need to get to know our neighbours and celebrate what we share, rather than fear any differences we perceive. Our event in Walsall celebrated the diversity that enriches our borough through music, performance, food and other activities.

The day was a great success and thank you to those members who were able to attend and share what we hope will become an annual event.

The day was match funded by the Near Neighbours project, which held a subsequent meeting in Darlaston, bringing together speakers from many different faiths, elected members and the local community. It was at this meeting the local

Coordinator commended Walsall's approach, above many other local areas, to working in partnership across the faith sector to build capacity and support cohesion.

## **Cohesion**

Indeed, cohesion has been a significant focus this year, with the findings and initial recommendations of the Scrutiny Working Group on Cohesion considered and agreed by full council on 21 July with the proposed responses to the remaining recommendations being considered and agreed by Cabinet on 7 September.

In accordance with these, the draft strategy is nearing completion and will be out to consultation in the New Year. One of the key areas my officers will be tackling will be the impact of social and economic difference across the borough which results in parochialism, ultimately stifling integration. Quite simply, we need to bring communities together in order to counter negative stereo typing and increase our understanding.

That said, the diversity Walsall currently enjoys has also brought with it some challenges, with conflicting lifestyles and behaviours causing friction in some areas. We are fortunate to now be working with Nash Dom, an organisation which specialises in providing multi-lingual support either directly to service users or agencies, delivering engagement opportunities, education and, where necessary, supporting enforcement. Our initial project with them has brought together officers from Money, Home, Job, Clean and Green, West Midlands Police and members of the community, all working together to provide sustainable solutions to complex issues.

I will ensure Cohesion remains a high priority for the Council

## **Community Safety**

Our intervention and prevention work with victims of crime and vulnerable locations has delivered security improvements to over 30 sites including large projects for Goscote corridor and Short Heath Park to tackle off road motorcycles, fly tipping and associated anti social behaviour. In order to support the council in meeting its obligations under the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, the Community Safety Team continues to be a key consultee on planning and licensing issues, significantly looking at the impact of increasing numbers of licensed premises and HMOs in some of our neighbourhoods.

Moving to our town centres, our business crime initiative Facewatch continues to grow in membership and support our local retailers by utilising new technology to report crime, upload evidence and share intelligence in a timely manner.

Community Safety is also supporting Walsall's Healthy High Streets initiative, bringing our business partners together to tackle issues that impact our town centre, ensuring it continues to develop further as a great place to visit and invest.

We continue to encourage our residents to play their part in keeping their neighbourhoods safe and will continue to support the Police and Crime Commissioners Active Citizens programme, which is lead by West Midlands Police and delivered in partnership with Walsall Voluntary Action and Walsall College. This project provides an opportunity for residents to get involved by providing funding, support and accredited training.

As Chair of Safer Walsall Partnership, I will continue to work with our partners to ensure we deliver against our shared objectives as efficiently and effectively as possible. As we move towards aligning strategic priorities across our statutory governance boards, we will ensure the issues that impact upon the safety and well being of our communities remain a priority.

The Board will adopt a scrutiny approach to delivery against our priorities, which include violent crime and drug and alcohol misuse. We will also develop an on going conversation with our communities and elected members so the work of the Partnership is informed by the residents we serve and opportunities given to hold agencies to account.

### **Partnerships and Community**

I am grateful for the support and effort from people in the Community who do fantastic things with little reward but are essential. They are very much a part of what makes Walsall a wonderful place to live. I have this year visited many of the organisations that support the community and listened to their views. I have also listened to the many people who give up their time to volunteer to help people. I want this to be an ongoing theme for my teams. We need to listen more to our communities to ensure we work together to deliver better.

We have supported the previous Cabinets commitment to Walsall Voluntary Action and see a vital place for a Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Organisation. Increasing the voice and contribution of the sector is key and I am committed to ensuring that this happens.

Our Area Managers continue to work hand in hand with the community and partners to strengthen our work in the Areas. The good work they do is far too long to list here but some of the highlights are:

Aspire to Engage work in Partnership with Walsall FC which supported Events at the Bescot Stadium.

Over 50's Community Event at the Town Hall sponsored by HomeServe and Blakemore wholesale.

Started before I became portfolio holder, the shared area in the Civic Centre has created a space where Council team and Partners can operate collaboratively. It has proved an invaluable space and as we work more closely with our partners I see really positive work coming from a closer working relationship.

## **Regulatory Services**

In April 2016 there was a significant redesign of the regulatory services teams. This was driven by a need to meet savings targets and service pressures. The former specialist teams which dealt with Statutory Nuisance, Environmental Crime, Licensing Enforcement and Anti Social Behaviour have been merged into one Community Protection Team. Whilst there was a change in the management structure for the Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing Teams.

## **Community Protection Team**

The aim of this redesign is to give more resilience and flexibility to the services by training officers up to be able to deal with a broader range of issues that are within the scope of the team. There are efficiencies to be obtained too as one officer is able to deal with a problem that overlaps more than one of the old disciplines.

This has been a challenging process but the new ways of working are bedding in and officers are developing some initiatives to tackle long standing problems in a different way utilising better their combined skills and experience.

This team is responsible for the management of unauthorised encampments and 2016 saw the increasing trend of the number and frequency of such camps continue. In October 2016 the authority obtained an injunction from the County Court to tackle the worst elements of anti-social behaviour experienced with some camps.

It is anticipated that the team (and pre-existing teams pre 1/4/16) will deal with approximately 10,000 complaints visits and enforcement notices issued during 2016.

## **Business Compliance**

Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Licensing use a range of interventions to protect the health of Walsall residents and workers. The service also takes the opportunity wherever possible to promote public health initiatives particularly around tobacco control, healthy workplaces and an innovative obesity project called 'Health Switch' aimed at increasing healthy choices and cooking techniques at takeaway premises. So far 32 Takeaways in the Borough have been issued with Health Switch Awards 8 at Gold level, 7 at Silver and 17 at Bronze.

Environmental Health responded to over 200 infectious disease notifications including two food poisoning outbreaks where swift identification of poor practices meant further spread of disease was prevented. Over 1000 food inspections have been undertaken this year and despite the economic climate levels of compliance have generally increased. Where conditions at businesses have been unacceptable robust action has been taken with 6 businesses being closed for filthy or rodent infested kitchens and 10 prosecutions completed for conditions posing a risk to public health.

The Health and Safety team have carried out interventions in relation to legionella, carbon monoxide poisoning from solid fuel appliances, infection control practices at tattooists and sun bed safety. Staff received around 200 accident reports and have initiated over 70 enforcement actions relating to prohibition or improvement of work places or practices in order to protect workers health. A successful prosecution was also taken against an unregistered skin piercing operation following complaints of infections being passed on.

The Animal Control service visited over 3000 residences to deal with pest infestations as well as sewer baiting and targeted rodent baiting in a group of streets where pest and refuse issues were known to be a significant issue. Over 400 stray dogs were also collected by this service.

During the year the Trading Standards sampling programmes identified carcinogenic food colours in Asian sweets, peanuts in peanut free takeaway meals and illegal and unsafe ingredients in body building supplements. A regional project around pizza toppings was organised by our officers uncovering significant results around the misdescription of cheese and ham and adulteration of meat toppings

Joint working between Trading Standards, Walsall Police, Border Control and HMRC lead to test purchases and in some cases raids at shops selling tobacco and alcohol to children, distributing counterfeit and non duty paid tobacco and selling 'legal highs'. These joint interventions disrupt the supply of these illicit and harmful products, raise public awareness and can lead to prosecution of those people profiting from their supply.

The Licensing Service has moved forward with initiatives and policy changes affecting the taxi trade. Steps are being taken to strengthen the policy around testing wheelchair restraints to protect users being carried in wheelchair accessible vehicles. A review and overhaul of taxi driver training to include modern issues such as child and adult safeguarding and disability awareness has been undertaken and is being implemented to ensure Walsall taxi drivers are at the forefront of protecting their customers and providing intelligence to enforcement and care agencies.

**Councillor Julie Fitzpatrick**  
**Cabinet Portfolio Holder**  
**Community, Leisure & Culture**  
**29 December 2016**