

Council – 13 January 2014

Leisure and Culture

Report of Councillor Harris, Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture

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.

2013 proved an extremely successful year for sport and leisure. Visits to the leisure centres and sports development activities exceeded 1 million for the first time. The Council's re-launched leisure discount scheme, "Move-it", has transformed the way people access sport and leisure services with the number of people using the centres from disadvantaged communities going up four-fold.

The council has a £2million "in-principle" award from Sport England to support our ambitious proposals to replace the leisure centres at Bloxwich and Oak Park - a key output of our Active Living Working Smarter review.

In addition, notification was received in December that a further £250,000 had been secured from Sport England to deliver a range of new programmes over the next three years to transform levels of physical activity in Walsall residents. Through such schemes, we are now starting to make a difference. The nation-wide "Active People" results published in December 2013 indicated that the number of Walsall residents meeting recommended levels of physical activity has leapt from 17% to 22% in the past 12 months. Walsall is now the highest in the Black Country. This is extremely positive news evidencing the impact the service is having and with the proposals for new leisure centres and programmes there is every prospect of this improvement continuing.

The catering service has become a significant partner in the Food Bank Project led by Cllr Towe. The transport team currently collect food from eleven Aldi stores, three Lidl stores and also Sainsburys. Working in conjunction with Links to Work, Revenue & Benefits and other agencies the scheme delivers food to those in greatest need at several centres within Walsall. This essential project is due to expand further in 2014.

We have made good inroads into achieving full cost recovery for the in-house catering service to schools. This significantly reduces the financial responsibility for the council and helps us move towards meeting the Council's budgetary pressure. I am pleased to be able to confirm that, with Cllr Rachel Andrew's support, we have made a commitment to a three year contract with the many schools who want to remain with the Council's catering service. The government's proposal for free

school meals for Key Stage 1 children from next September also offers a great opportunity.

During 2013, bereavement services have completed the Streetly Crematorium improvements to prevent the emission of mercury into the atmosphere. This project, costing £1.8million, has taken three years and will ensure our compliance with stringent government environmental limits.

We will be bringing forward proposals for the extension of existing burial facilities Willenhall Lawn Cemetery. This will ensure that residents in that area have access to adequate local cemetery provision consistent with that available in the majority of the borough for a number of years to come.

The merger of Green Space Services and Street Pride into a new combined Clean and Green Service has resulted in efficiencies, collaborative working and real positive benefits to the customer.

The use of Walsall's green spaces, allotment and community gardens continues to increase and an extensive programme of improvements across the borough has been carried out in full partnership with Friends and User groups and ward members. This includes investment of almost £1million in infrastructure and facilities over and above that in the Arboretum.

Palfrey Park, Merrions Wood and Willenhall Memorial Park successfully retained Green Flag Awards and work is progressing well towards securing the award for Blackwood Park, Rough Wood and Bentley Haye in 2014

The Greenspace Ranger Service during 2013 has facilitated over 70 school projects and visits to parks across the borough, facilitated over 30 external events, organised over 20 positive community events and activities and recently organised 3 community bonfire events attracting over 10,000 people. The team has engaged with over 7000 people in environmental education and enforcement activities which have seen a positive reduction in anti-social behaviour.

The final phase of the Heritage Lottery funded Restoration Programme for the Arboretum, the building of a new park visitor centre, is due to commence early in the New Year. The £7.6million renovation of the town's premier park is well advanced and will conclude with the new Centre which will undoubtedly be the park's centrepiece. The works completed to date have restored the park to its former glory and have proved popular with users.

The new £225,000 waterplay splashpad opened in May and proved extremely popular for the summer period. The park was well used for external events and activities working with established partners, major events hosted this year were Race for Life, Walsall Show and the Acorns Hospice Lantern Walk. The park is a weekly venue for Park Run, part of a national scheme and weekly cycle rides were

organised by Sports Development throughout the summer. A cycling club is now running monthly rides for the winter period, with the plan to expand the programme later this year.

The Barr Beacon war memorial and flagpole were fully restored as part of the 'Raising the Barr' Heritage Lottery Fund project. Some 5,000 people attended this year's Bands on the Beacon event and a Remembrance Service was attended by over 600 local schoolchildren.

Following extensive public consultation, heathland restoration work on Brownhills Common has continued and a new Friends group was established.

For Libraries, Heritage and Arts, 2013 was a successful year. A new library was opened as part of the new Pelsall Village Centre. The building was opened by HRH the Earl of Wessex and residents of the Pelsall area are enjoying the benefits of having so many popular services under one roof.

The New Art Gallery hosted a year-long exhibition by the celebrated artist Damien Hirst, which ended in October. During the year, 235,938 people visited the Gallery to see the exhibition, an 18% (35,950) increase on previous years. The Gallery is also developing a partnership with the Tate which will enable Walsall people to see exhibitions that are rarely seen outside London, including Epstein's "Rock Drill" and works by J.M.W. Turner, Britain's greatest ever painter.

We have been awarded a grant by the Arts Council to bring the story behind the borough's historic Bayard's Colts to life for local people. This will include a play entitled Tat Man Tales, specially commissioned for the project, family fun days and storytelling courses. The performances and activities will take place between April and June 2014 and the project is being delivered as a partnership between the Museum service and the Creative Development Team.

The public programme at Forest Arts Centre continues to offer a diverse range of theatre, concerts, films, shows, exhibitions and workshops which have attracted enterprising performances and capacity audiences. Feedback from clients suggests that Forest Arts Centre is their preferred venue for conferences, meetings and training events. The lead-in time to book Auditorium 1 for major theatre or music events is now as much as 14 months, dependent upon the time of year required.

Walsall Adult and Community College become the first college in the country to be judged as outstanding under the new Ofsted framework. Inspectors praised the quality of teaching and learning and the college received the highest possible grading in all five inspection areas. The College's work on equality and diversity has been recognised by winning the Leaders in Diversity Award Level 3 in September. The college is one of only two colleges in the UK to gain this prestigious accolade. The college was also awarded the Sustainability Champion Award at the Green

Gown Awards in November 2013. The Green Gown Awards recognise exceptional sustainability initiatives being undertaken by universities and colleges across the UK. A WACC learner, Lisa Edwards, won the National Adult Learner Award in the category of Learning for Work. She is now employed by Walsall Housing Group and acts as a local learning champion to encourage others to return to learning.

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 2014 gets underway. I would like to place on record my thanks and appreciation to staff in these services, at all levels, who have made these achievements possible.

Councillor Anthony Harris
Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture