

Cabinet Member Briefing

The Deputy Leader and Regeneration Portfolio Holder



Introduction

Areas of responsibility:

- regeneration;
- economic development;
- planning policy;
- employment growth;
- skills;
- strategic housing; and
- strategic transport.

Strategic context

The economy is one of the priorities of the council plan and has emerged as a key issue in our long-term strategy – We Are Walsall 2040. The strategic deliverables emerging from this work include:

- regeneration;
- strategic housing;
- economic development; and
- education, skills and lifelong learning.

Overview

The council is driving a transformative place making programme to create the conditions for increased investment, quality homes, the right jobs and skills in the right places.

While the council is leading on several major projects to transform the town centre and wider borough, we work to develop excellent relationships with a range of developers, businesses and providers to arrive at flexible solutions to place making as part of the picture of the £1.5bn investment generated in Walsall.

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Our Projects

Key Developments and Investments

Housing Development

The council works with partners and developers to promote good sustainable growth throughout the borough. Substantial investment has been directed towards housing development, resulting in approximately 1,000 new homes either completed or in delivery in locations like Hollyhedge Lane, Goscote Lodge Crescent, Goscote Lane, and Caparo. Collaboration with the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), West Midlands Combined Authority, and key developers has enabled the transformation of brownfield sites into thriving residential areas.

Employment Sites

Strategic sites like SPARK (formerly Phoenix 10) and Parallel 113 within the Black Country Enterprise Zone have seen real progress, with occupiers secured for new developments at Reedswood and Impact Park in Leamore. These sites play a vital role in the borough's economic success and have been complemented by transport infrastructure investments at Junction 10 and rail infrastructure improving connections between Walsall and Birmingham.



Parallel 113



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SPARK

Connected Gateway

A joint initiative funded by the Future High Street Fund and the council aims to create a landmark arrival experience to Walsall's town centre, improving connectivity between transport hubs and establishing a new public square. The project, expected to complete by 2025/26, enhances the town's appeal to visitors, increasing footfall and dwell time.

Town Deal

Walsall and Bloxwich have received £21.3 million each in Town Deal funding to support various projects - by attracting a more diverse visitor base and supporting a more flexible day and night time economy through these Town Deal schemes, the town becomes more competitive as a destination.

Town Deal funded projects include the Construction Skills Academy, Advanced Electric Vehicle Technology Centre, Town Centre Theatre, Active Travel and Connectivity schemes, Digital Skills Hub, Creative Industries Enterprise Centre, Active Public Spaces, and Community Capital initiatives.

Bloxwich Town Deal Schemes

Bloxwich also has several Town Deal projects, demonstrating our drive to support and improve the economies of the wider borough, including those related to active travel, construction skills, community capital, incubation space and digital access, and green initiatives to promote community health and well-being.

Public Realm Investment Plan (PRIP)

This plan is crucial for enhancing Walsall town centre's public spaces and key routes, aligning with the Town Centre Masterplan to help businesses, residents and visitors to use and enjoy our public spaces.

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Challenge Building

The Challenge Building near to Walsall Civic Centre was demolished to make way for a modern medical centre, which was completed in August 2023. It accommodates four GP practices and is designed with sustainability and energy efficiency in mind. Plans are also underway for potential development on the adjacent council-owned land.



Station Quarter

Progress continues on the Station Quarter project – through positive partnerships with landowners in the area surrounding the station we are focused on introducing quality residential development in the town centre to complement the Connected Gateway and Town Deal initiatives.

M6 Junction 10

Walsall Council is working with various agencies to improve transportation in the borough, including the reopening of the Walsall to Wolverhampton rail line and highway improvements at M6 Junction 10. Intra-regional train services are expected to be re-routed along this line to serve the new stations. A business case has also been developed to extend train services to a proposed new station at Aldridge with funding ringfenced in the CRSTS (City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement).

The main construction phase of the £78m major highway improvement scheme at M6 Junction 10 has continued to progress, which will improve the highway infrastructure at this location in the borough, with much greater highway capacity controlled by new intelligent traffic signals. The scheme has been an example of positive partnership working and effective engagement with both stakeholders and the local community. The additional capacity created at the junction helps unlock new development, especially along the Walsall – Wolverhampton corridor.

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M6 J10 September 2023

Our Strategies

Walsall Local Plan

The council is progressing toward a comprehensive Borough Local Plan that prioritizes brownfield sites and addresses local housing and employment needs. The Local Plan Advisory Board guides the plan's development and addresses emerging issues. This is a fantastic opportunity for the council to work with businesses and residents to understand how to generate good growth throughout the borough and shape successful development for homes and business.

Town Centre Masterplan

The vision driving the town centre masterplan states that:

“Walsall will attract visitors based on its leisure and culture offers; including its internationally significant art gallery. The town centre environment will be easily navigable with healthy streets, which encourage walking and cycling and maximise the value of significant public spaces through regular events and activities”.

The projects described below, supported by the Future High Streets Fund, Towns Fund, Walsall Council and the West Midlands Combined Authority, are taking forward schemes which will make this happen.

Much of the work is concentrated in one area of the town centre which will create that critical mass of improvements and development which will stimulate further investment.

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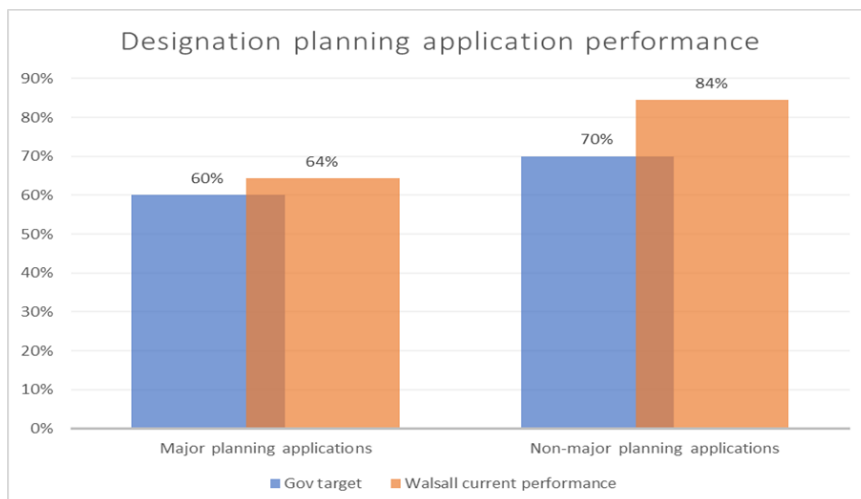
Town centre masterplan

Our Service Delivery

Planning and Development:

Development Management

The council has been on a journey to improve its development management service to reduce backlog cases, support applications, and enhance decision-making quality. Enforcement actions have led to successful prosecutions and have also contributed to the reuse and redevelopment of derelict sites. Performance figures have seen significant upturns with reports presented to Planning Committee and Scrutiny.



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Building Control

Building control officers are transitioning to Registered Building Inspectors as part of industry changes, with new regulations and a Building Safety Levy expected in the future.

Business Support

Digital Connectivity

Efforts are being made to improve digital connectivity, ensuring that residents have access to high-speed internet and that employment sites are attractive to investors. The "smart city" approach is being employed to address various priority themes.

High Streets and Business Support

Walsall Council is collaborating with various organizations, including the West Midlands Growth Company, the West Midland Mayor's Town Centre Taskforce and the central government's High Streets Task Force, to address the challenges faced by high streets.

Walsall Council is engaging with businesses, landowners, developers, and investors to drive new development and job creation.

The council is working with Shopappy Ltd., an online resource supporting local independent shops and businesses.

General Support

European funding has ended, leading to the launch of new business support initiatives at local, regional, and national levels. Walsall Council has introduced SME grant programmes and a high growth business program in collaboration with our procurement team. We are exploring partnerships with private sector membership bodies and trade organizations to enhance local business support.

Business Grants for SMEs

The ERDF funded AIM for Gold has allocated over £730k in grant funds to SMEs. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund has been working to allocate grants for SME productivity and net zero/energy efficiency improvements.

Strategic Account Management

The council is relaunching the Walsall Borough Economic Forum and maintaining 1-1 engagement with strategic businesses. We continue to collaborate with strategic partners like the Black Country Chamber, Walsall College, and the University of Wolverhampton.

To articulate and promote our offer in terms of being an attractive location for investors and developers and a great place to do business, we will be establishing a presence at UKREiiF, a well recognised showcase event which will support our growing presence as a destination.

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Skills and Employment to deliver business growth:

Walsall Works

Walsall Works provides employability support, job placements, and skills training to local residents in partnership with employers. It targets specific sectors, including health and social care, construction, business administration, and logistics. Over the years, it has supported thousands of individuals in finding employment and training opportunities.

Black Country Impact

Black Country Impact supports young people aged 16-29, including those who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Collaborative working and personalized support help remove barriers and guide young people into training or work. Over the program's delivery period, it has supported thousands of young people.

Other skills and employment initiatives

Walsall Council is involved in the DWP Kickstart scheme, aiming to create paid work placements for 16-24-year-old universal benefit claimants in collaboration with employers. The Restart scheme provides employability support to long-term unemployed individuals, with the goal of moving them into employment. Works+ and 50+ are grant-funded programs that target unemployed residents, especially those aged 50 and over, and aim to provide training, support, and work placements. The programmes address issues like social isolation and poor skills to improve personal wellbeing and community engagement.

Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG)

CIAG offers employment advice and skills support to schools and vulnerable young people, promoting local economic development. The program aims to re-enter vulnerable young people aged 15 into education. These initiatives and programs reflect the council's commitment to boosting economic growth, improving infrastructure, and enhancing the overall quality of life for its residents.

Transport

We have worked towards the implementation of the Black Country Ultra Low Emission Vehicle (ULEV) Strategy, which sets targets for the installation of vehicle chargers, and the purchase by councils of electric vehicles only for all new cars and vans to ensure that we are ready to comply with government targets to ban new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2035 (revised target) and to be UK net-zero by 2050.

The road safety team has been an active partner supporting West Midlands Police in their multiagency road safety operations - road safety has now been brought back in house after a number of years shared services with Wolverhampton.

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In 2022/23, the council approved the allocation of additional CRSTS funding to road safety, boosting the annual spend in the borough by over 40%. This commitment was continued into 2023/24.

A series of walking, cycling, scooting and road safety initiatives with training and support is being given to schools to help them develop and promote more 'active environments' which make active travel an easier and safer choice for all members of the community.

The council has delivered a variety of local network improvements including traffic calming schemes in locations across the borough. This includes installing or upgrading zebra crossings, the introduction of traffic calming measures and vehicle activated speed signs, and the operation of average speed enforcement cameras on certain 'A' roads in the borough.

Work on extending the cycle network in the Willenhall area is being progressed with Active Travel Funding

Asset Management

The council is transforming its property portfolio management to a corporate landlord model, focusing on strategic asset planning and disposal of surplus assets. The asset management team is supporting regeneration projects like Connected Gateways and Town Centre projects.

Housing Standards and Improvement

Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG)

The DFG programme facilitates housing adaptations for residents with disabilities. In 2022/23 the team approved 490 DFG applications totalling £3.55m. Cabinet approved an updated Housing Renewal Assistance Policy which has further streamlined the service, which offers a flexible approach to helping residents to stay safe, and well, living in their own homes. The team continues to deliver minor works, handyperson service, links with Walsall Society for Blind and links with the energy team to enable disabled residents to access retro-fit works.

Tackling fuel poverty

The team continue to tackle fuel poverty by helping to secure new, or improved, Energy Performance Certificates (EPC) for private rented homes.

Local Authority Delivery scheme (LADs)

The service has delivered two rounds of LADS funded schemes resulting in:

- 186 homes securing external wall insulation;
- 91 homes securing loft and cavity wall insulation; and
- 428 homes securing solar PV panels to enable them to undertake micro-generation of energy. The estimated total output of this is 1 million kwh per year.

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The council secured funds of circa £6.5m for round 3 to assist residents with various energy savings measures eg external wall, loft and cavity insulation, also solar PV panels

Home Upgrade Grant Scheme (HUGs)

The council has secured HUGS funding worth £5.9m to help those households on low income in energy efficiency homes and who do not have gas as a source of home heating. The programme has so far helped 427 homes and will continue until March 2025.

Warm Homes

Funding was secured from the National Grid charity to provide first time central heating for a range of vulnerable households.

Social Housing Decarbonisation

One of the largest single awards of funding nationally was secured for Watmos to retrofit 858 homes. The scheme has now completed.

Retrofit

In July 2023 we secured £185K revenue from the Midlands Energy Hub as part of the Local Energy Advice Demonstrator (LEAD) project to deliver home based detailed retro-fit advice and support to parents / carers of children attending Hilary Primary School

Household Support Fund

In 2021/22 a total of £225,000 was delivered to address gas boiler issues in owner occupied properties with disabled occupants. A similar project of £274,000 was completed in 2022/23 and expanded to assist those households who are caring for a Walsall adopted child, fostered child or similar. This scheme has helped about 160 households.

Gas Safety Charity Hardship Fund

£21k has been provided by Foundation Independent Living Trust to address gas safety, gas leak or CO poisoning for repairs, servicing, testing and replacements. This has helped about 72 households in the last year.

Council Health Through Warmth (HTW) Project

During 2022/23 and 2023/24 this budget is principally being used to fund design work to maximise the opportunities for residents to access this funding stream. In addition, the fund will continue where possible to provide a 'safety net' for vulnerable owner occupiers with dangerous or condemned heating systems.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

In March 2023, £25,000 was awarded to assist with the cost of the detailed energy monitoring of the SHDF Watmos project. This is providing valuable information on

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use of energy and heating levels within flats before and after the works have been completed. A bid was also approved for targeted help to residents on topics such as energy saving, bill reduction, carbon saving and support of the voluntary sector in the same areas.

First Additional (HMO) Licensing scheme launched

Following comprehensive statutory consultation, the first area of the borough for additional licensing of house in multiple occupation launched in September 2022. This licensing scheme covers 4 wards and includes all private rented HMOs that have 3 or more tenants from more than 1 household. Consultation on a second scheme covering 5 further wards was completed in 2022 and this was approved by cabinet for launch later in 2023.

Housing Enforcement

In 2023 the service has received 755 enquiries about housing standards of which 312 have warranted a follow-up property inspection. In most cases landlords have complied with requests to improve properties but statutory action was required in others. The council takes a robust stance against rogue landlords. In 2023 the Service has focussed on licensing and enforcing minimum standards in HMOs and ensuring that landlords comply with electrical safety regulations. As part of this we have a range of statutory notices and penalty fine regarding properties deemed unsafe to be occupied or which had breached HMO licence conditions.

After long-term empty homeowners failed to heed officer advice, the service sought authority from the Planning Inspectorate for Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO). These CPOs were confirmed by the Inspectorate for 5 dwellings in 2022. The properties are currently in the council's ownership and are to be refurbished for future supported housing purposes.

Other activity

The Service secured £250k from central government pathfinder project to be used in targeting the areas with the worst private rented sector accommodation in the borough. In the coming months the Service will work together with Community Protection to clamp down on rogue landlords and environmental crime.

Homes for Ukraine Scheme (HUS) Inspections

The standards team agreed a set of relevant standards and have so far inspected 73 properties where residents have offered their homes as accommodation for Ukrainian refugees. This vital service continues to help support the refugees and ensure that their accommodation is safe.

Decent homes standard

The service is currently coordinating delivery of a capital grant funding of circa £2 million from central government through the WMCA that is aimed at ensuring that social housing in the borough meets the decent homes standard.

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New Burdens Fund

The service received £54k from the fund to ensure that high rise buildings (18m or 7 storeys or more in height) do not have unsafe cladding. We are currently working with the owners most of whom are RPs to ensure that each of the relevant tower blocks are fire safety compliant.

The service is also part of a central government funded Supported Housing Improvement Scheme (SHIP) which is aimed at improving the quality of accommodation, support and care for residents living in supported housing properties. In 2023 the service has inspected about 77 supported accommodation properties comprising of 107 units of accommodation.

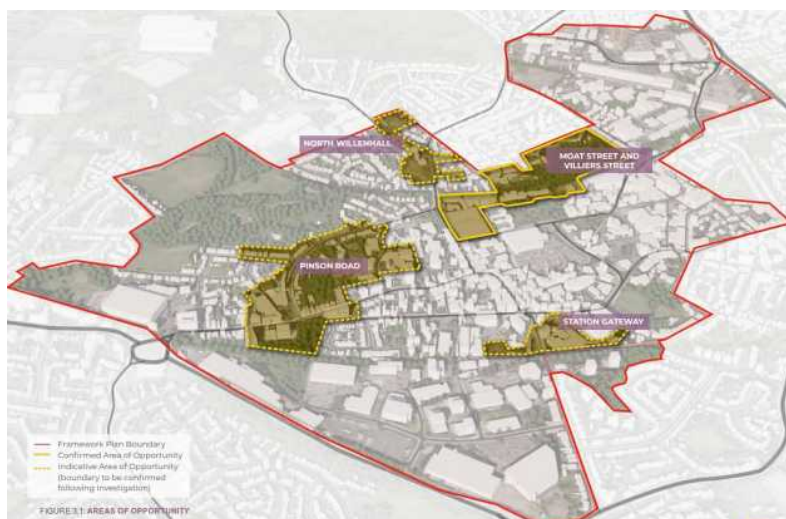
Future Works

Willenhall Framework Plan

The Willenhall Framework Plan sets out a 10-year vision which aims to revitalize the town by bringing derelict properties and land into productive use, with a focus on place making, housing growth and community well-being with healthy and active lifestyles. Various phases are identified for delivery, with support from the Levelling Up Fund and the Land and Property Investment Fund (LPIF).

Quality design and sustainable construction will move Willenhall towards a healthy, prosperous and sustainable future. There are four opportunity areas identified in the plan, which are categorised for delivery over the short, medium and long term. In total the aim is to provide up to 500 new homes with associated environmental and connectivity benefits.

The Moat Street/Villiers Street area of opportunity has been identified as Phase 1 and the initial focus for the Council. The proposed approach to delivery is that the Council undertakes land assembly, obtains outline planning approvals and procures a development partner to deliver high quality housing and public realm.



Willenhall Framework Plan and Areas of Opportunity



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View 1 - Looking from the War Memorial down Moat Street



View of parcel E - Junction of Villiers St and Cemetery Road.

Levelling Up Zone (LUZ)

The proposed Walsall Growth Corridor, one of the designated Levelling Up Zones, is being developed in consultation with government and partners such as the West Midlands Combined Authority, focusing on brownfield redevelopment for housing and employment spaces, emphasizing place-making and long-term investment conditions.



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The LUZ sites will include gateway housing and commercial/ leisure opportunities in the town centre; housing sites in Willenhall identified as part of the Framework Plan; and potential high-quality employment land adjacent the M6 Junction 10/ A454 highway network.

Work is ongoing to establish the LUZ with the expectation it will be in place in April 2024.

Darlaston Long Term Plan

It has recently been announced that Darlaston will receive funding and support worth £20m for a new long-term plan. This will be an endowment-style fund and support to give long term certainty to deliver projects over ten years and the flexibility to invest in interventions based on local needs and priorities. There will be freedom to develop plans that meet local priorities across the broad investment themes of safety and security; high street, heritage, and regeneration; and transport and connectivity.

The council will now work with government to understand more about the programme and how the fund will be delivered in order to develop the long-term plan.

Levelling Up Partnership

Walsall has been selected as one of the twenty Levelling Up Partnership (LUP) areas, with potential capital funding of around £20 million. The LUP is set to commence work in early 2024, aiming to drive progress in line with the government's levelling up priorities.

Thank you

All this does not happen without experienced and dedicated Officers who work tirelessly to the political priorities that the experienced Administration set. The partnership working on a Black Country level, wider regional level and nationally has contributed a great deal to our success in Walsall Borough and a successful region leads to a successful Walsall Borough.



Signed
Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration