

Council – 6th January 2020

Community, Leisure and Culture Councillor Garry Perry Portfolio Holder

I am pleased to report to Council that the services within Community, Leisure and Culture have continued to deliver sterling work over the past twelve months. My services cover a wide variety of front-line services and I will start with those in Environmental Health:

Environmental Health

Food Safety

The service continues to inspect businesses to ensure they are hygienically preparing, storing and serving food in order to protect public health. Following on from last years report it is again satisfying to note that compliance with food hygiene law in Walsall Businesses continues to improve and is at the highest it has been since the introduction of the rating system in 2011 with 91% of businesses achieving a satisfactory rating or higher on the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme. Of these businesses nearly 50% have the very highest rating (5) and of the 1800 business rated only 0.3% (4) have the very lowest rating (0). The service also continues to ensure that those few businesses who consistently flout hygiene regulations are robustly dealt with three individuals were prosecuted for failure to maintain hygienic standards with a further three cases pending. Four businesses have been formally closed using emergency powers due to pest infestations and eight served with health and safety prohibition notices due to unsafe equipment posing an immediate risk to staff.

Health Switch Award

Health Switch encourages and rewards good compliance with food hygiene regulation and the provisions of a wider variety of healthy foods and food preparation processes at takeaway premises. The award has been introduced to over 150 takeaway businesses - 63 businesses have been issued with Bronze Awards, 34 have been issued with Silver Awards and 16 have been issued Gold Awards. The attainment of the award is reported well on social media. This year great strides have been made in widening this scheme out to hot food mobiles and soft play centres. The mobile caterers at this year's Council fireworks events worked with the Health Switch team and successfully took up the challenge of making the food they sell healthier.

The Health Switch Team are also rolling out the water refill scheme run by Severn Trent Water and the City to Sea organisation to encourage people to fill up water bottles at shops and reduce plastic pollution.

Health and Safety

Environmental Health received notifications of accidents that take place at businesses within the Borough. These accidents are risk assessed for severity and investigations undertaken where resources allow.

Some of the more significant investigations that have taken place include working alongside the Health and Safety Executive on a fatality investigation concerning legionnaire's disease at a hostel. A flooring collapse at a shop where a customer fell into

a basement and had to be rescued by the fire service. Other significant incidents include the severing of fingers by a circular saw, electrocution from a three phase consumer unit and work with Public Health England on a case of Hepatitis B associated with a Walsall tattooist. The service has also served Improvement and Prohibition notices on dangerous work equipment and facilities available to the public where this has been necessary to protect people's health and safety.

The team regularly work with Public Health colleagues on infection control relating to the beauty sector including tattooists, micro-bladers and emerging beauty treatments. This includes contributing to seminars for GP's and care home workers on legionella and skin piercing infections.

The team have worked with partners including the Police and Fire service to tackle premises identified as high risk and requiring a multi-agency problem solving approach. This has included attending meetings and sharing intelligence in relation to modern day slavery and CSE.

Pest Control.

It has been a busy year for the two pest control officers and they have attended over 1700 appointments helping eradicate pests at resident homes. They have also responded to dozens of sightings of pests on council and open land where they carry out surveys to find the source of the infestation and work with others to remove the problem. The officers will be embarking shortly on a programme of baiting the main and domestic sewers with bait to assist in controlling rat activity in areas of high risk or demand. They have also contributed to the control of dog fouling in the Borough by placing 'anti fouling' signage up in 30 streets where problems with fouling exist.

Trading Standards

Trading Standards continue to use local, regional and national intelligence to identify key issues that need action to protect the public's health and also financial detriment. This year has seen the team very much focus on key areas of work that not only meet their own statutory responsibilities but also make a significant contribution to the wider communities of Walsall and Corporate priorities.

Collaborative working with Police and HMRC colleagues has seen vast hauls of illicit tobacco removed from sale in the Borough. This tobacco is often counterfeit so contains 'ingredients' that are even more harmful than normal tobacco, the sellers also evade tax and therefore millions of pounds of revenue is lost which could otherwise be funding vital public services. Many of these premises also sell to children and staff organise under age sales exercises to catch those placing the children of Walsall at risk.

Work has also continued to disrupt and remove unsafe counterfeit goods or goods that do not meet relevant safety standards (including toys, make up, perfume, cleaning products and electrical goods) from sale. One raid alone was estimated to have removed over £100,000 worth of illegal goods from sale in the Borough.

The importance of this work cannot be stressed enough. The proceeds of these types of criminal activity often fund organised crime groups, have links to drugs, terrorism, modern day slavery and other heinous crimes. The intelligence Trading Standards provides not

only protects Walsall residents but forms a larger intelligence picture that the regional and national agencies can use to identify and tackle organised crime.

On a more local level intensive food sampling activity has identified out of date food being sold in large quantities, food with undeclared allergens being sold and cheap meat being substituted for more expensive meat in order to defraud customers. A massive piece of work was undertaken between Environmental Health and Trading Standards to control the nationwide sale of foodstuffs produced at a premises within the borough that had incorrect allergen advice on the label and possible large-scale contamination of allergens in the products themselves. A nationwide product recall was initiated which could potentially have saved many lives.

The team have also responded positively to reports of door-step crime and recovered significant amounts of money, certainly in excess of £10,000 for vulnerable residents who have been miss sold or overcharged for products by unscrupulous traders.

Licensing

This has been another year of significant change for the Licensing Service. A new Team Leader was employed part way through the year and alongside the members of the team worked hard to modernise the service. The impact of the Proud Programme has had a major beneficial impact on this modernisation. For the first time applicants and licence holders are able to pay online and will shortly be able to apply for licences on line. The Team are providing information to DEFRA that will help develop a national picture of exhaust emissions and the harm these emissions cause. Policy development and implementation including Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles and implementation of the National Register of Revocations and Refusals will be complete in the New Year as further evidence of the Councils desire to promote equalities and protect the safety of residents. The development of the team in terms of training, attendance and contribution to regional workshops and meetings and development of new software continues to build a solid foundation for the service and better customer service for businesses and residents.

Regulatory Services

Community Protection

The Community Protection Team are responsible for enforcing a range of legislation relating to Taxi and Private Hire vehicles, Statutory Nuisance, antisocial behaviour, licensing, unauthorised encampments and environmental crime. The workload of the team remains high with over 7000 complaints and enquiries received. This work is undertaken through a programme of investigating individual complaints and conducting targeted enforcement operations.

In the autumn of 2019 a pilot commenced with small team of officers started who will work in a more intensive way in targeted locations. These locations have been selected using intelligence from the service and partners. Initially, they are Walsall Town Centre, an area based on Caldmore Green and the Beechdale Estate where the PSPO was renewed earlier this year. Initially there were 2 officers and in December, a further two have started with one more expected to start in January. We will be looking at adding an additional area at this point, probably in the West of the Borough. Although it is early days, they have made a difference already in these areas. They are working with property owners

and Community Payback on graffiti removal in Walsall Town Centre, linking in with the night shelter to work with beggars, street drinkers and rough sleepers, and with businesses and landlords to reduce fly tipping in Caldmore Green. As a result of their intervention, working with other Council services, the lease to a piece of land which was subject to fly tipping was terminated and the site secured to prevent recurrence.

Unauthorised Encampments (UE)

In 2019 there have been 55 (to beginning of December) UEs on Council Land or Highway and 16 on private land. Additional land has been brought within scope of injunctions and work is ongoing to further improve how UEs are managed and to support both residents and members of the travelling community. The number of UEs on Council land is slightly increased this year, but the figure has been skewed by one family setting up camp on multiple sites. This includes a working group of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The work and good practice being carried out in Walsall has been recognised nationally with an officer from the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government wanting to discuss our approach.

Work is ongoing with other services to identify a suitable location for the establishment of a transit site. The government has now published its response to the consultation on managing unauthorised encampments and developments and are now consulting on changes to the legislation, to which we will obviously respond.

Environmental Crime

Work is continuing to tackle a range of environmental crimes. In addition to the work carried out by the new enforcement offices, referred to above, there have been 2,400 complaints classed as environmental. This ranges from fly tipping to accumulations of waste in gardens and hedges overhanging the highway. These resulted in service of 121 formal notices, the issue of 23 Fixed Penalty Notices. One offender pleaded guilty in court to 3 offences of fly tipping and was ordered to pay a total of £3530. Two further cases are due in court early in the New Year. There are currently 36 live fly tipping investigations where fly tipping has been captured on CCTV. Officers from Walsall Council were filmed for Channel 5's Grim and Punishment programme and featured heavily in the Christmas special.

Licensing Enforcement

There have been a number of proactive enforcement operations targeting the hackney carriage and private hire trades. These are to ensure that the drivers and proprietors are complying with the requirements and to ensure that members of the public can travel in safety. In 2019, there has been a particular focus on supporting people with disabilities in these operations. There were 3 covert test purchase exercises to ensure that people accompanied by assistance dogs or who use wheelchairs were not refused journeys, not overcharged and were carried safely.

One driver was convicted in court for failing to carry a passenger in a wheelchair securely and was ordered to pay a total of £980 and his driving licence was endorsed with 3 penalty points. It was pleasing to note that the people with disabilities who assisted with this operation noted that the drivers provided excellent service and support in several instances.

During the autumn term, officers worked with the home to school transport team to carry out checks on drivers and vehicles under the contract. 23 vehicles were checked over 6 operations. There were 17 fully compliant and advice and cautions were issued for a range of minor breaches. 2 multi-agency operations were carried out to ensure the safety of our young people attending schools' proms events. As well as some vehicle defects, officers warned the driver of an ice-cream van about its unsuitability to transport passengers.

In addition, there were 4 multi-agency vehicle stop checks at which a total of 71 vehicles were checked. Generally compliance in the hackney carriage and private hire trades were good and the opportunity was taken to advise drivers of vans and trade vehicles about the correct disposal of waste.

11 private hire and hackney carriage drivers were revoked had their licences revoked or suspended by managers. One of whom had been sending inappropriate texts to a young person with learning disabilities who was provided with home to school transport. 305 vehicle suspensions were processed by the team.

There have been a number of multi-agency visits to licensed premises to ensure compliance with the legislation which have resulted in a review and updating of the conditions on some licences and 43 premises visited for failing to pay their annual fee.

Other Work

A conviction in court was secured for an offence of placing scaffolding on the highway without a permit following an incident where a lorry was damaged by a protruding scaffolding pole. There was a significant encroachment onto the highway during the construction of a care home. Community Protection Officers were instrumental in securing the reinstatement of the highway.

Resilient Communities

I am constantly amazed at the strength and resilience of our communities. As I travel around Walsall I see people and communities that give up their own time to deliver services our communities need. There are far too many organisations to include in this update but I would like to give you some examples:

High Heath Hub is a not for profit, social action, community based organisation based in High Heath with activities including a friendship café and litter picking. The Hub is a central point, providing focus for the community to support each other and offer services which make a difference.

The Watch- Community Safety Hub is run by committed volunteers who provide free and friendly crime prevention advice and supply domestic and personal safety items for sale at cost price. The volunteers are often seen out and about in Walsall but can be found in the Pelsall Village Centre where they work with other VCS groups to make Walsall a safer and better place.

Black Country Innovate, a CIC based in the centre of Walsall is currently working on Hate Crime. They have successfully trained 14 hate crime ambassadors in 2019/20 and there will be many more to come. I am passionate about discrimination of any type and

although there is a major challenge to remove discrimination, this work makes Walsall a better place. I will not back away from this agenda going forward.

The Cabinet report on resilient communities on the 18 December 2019 shows this administration's commitment to the public and communities and this commitment will continue with further detailed design work to come. This work is powerful and when we get this right our work will again be leading the way nationally.

Community Safety

At the end of July 2019, we saw the new interim appointment of the Community Safety Manager and we welcomed Susan Dicks to head up Community Safety and Safer Walsall Partnership role.

Since then we have seen the new Safer Walsall Partnership Plan and its key priorities to tackle the most challenging issues for maintaining and improving community safety in Walsall. The Partnership Plan sets out its '20-20 Vision' to tackle crime and disorder and create a safer Walsall, aspiring for strong and resilient communities where people are safer from harm and feel they belong.

The Partnership agreed to do a one-year plan for 2020, and this will then be reviewed in line with the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner's (PCC) new Crime Plan for 2021, together with the statutory annual strategic assessment.

On 30 July 2019 and 3 September 2019, the Safer Walsall Partnership (The Partnership) agreed the plan format and structure, together with the following priorities. 'Valuing and listening to the voice of the communities' underpin the priorities.

Violence reduction - Tackle Domestic Abuse; reduce youth violence

Prevent extremist activity - Increase ability to prevent and strengthen relationships with our communities and challenge hate crime

Reduce drugs and alcohol misuse - Increase the number of people completing drug and alcohol treatment

Reduce serious and organised crime - Reduce exploitation of vulnerable people, anti-social behaviour and serious crimes involving weapons

Reduce offending and reoffending - Design out the opportunity for crime and reduce repeat offending.

The new forward looking 2020 plan will be launched in January 2020, and with a renewed optimism and determination and a new partnership governance structure, The Partnership is confident that this plan will enable Walsall to thrive and create a safer resilient borough in which to live, work and visit.

The five priorities are informed by the statutory annual strategic assessment (undertaken in January 2019) and consultation with our partners, local communities and businesses, held June 2019. This has enabled us to understand what our collective data is telling us so that we could shape and identify our themes and strategic priorities.

The Partnership, from extensive engagement with our partners, communities and young people identified that there is a high demand for action to tackle issues relating to serious youth violence. We have set out our approach to tackling these issues within the 2020 plan, and we have given our pledge to set up a Safer Walsall Youth Partnership.

The new Governance Partnership structure gives responsibilities for implementing the priorities to designated strategic leads. Each priority lead is responsible for operational plans and the delivery of a number of actions and outcomes – delivering what we said we would do. Rigorous performance evaluation will monitor progress looking for clear evidence based outcomes and learning from what works.

In addition, we have seen the following success and developments:

Introduced a new DHR structure and joined up with the Serious Child Reviews (SCR) and Serious Adult Reviews (SAR) known as the Rapid Review Safeguarding Group.

West Midlands Police Kim Madill – 2020 plan Priority lead for Violence Reduction has successfully gained £100k funding from the West Midlands Police Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to commission a Walsall Youth Project in reducing violence with Walsall College and partners.

A new Safer Walsall Partnership web site will go live early February 2020.

Developed a new Contest delivery plan and governance structure to take effect January 2020.

Devised a new Safer Walsall Partnership Information Sharing Agreement.

Working with West Midlands Police and funded by the PCC, undertaken statutory annual Strategic Assessment for 2019, and findings will be completed January 2020 to inform the Safer Walsall Partnership of any changes or emerging issues for Community Safety.

2019/2020 Gained funding from West Midlands PCC of £148, 375 to commission Community Safety projects and £76,885 for Walsall Youth Justice crime prevention services.

Additional PCC funded, £20,000 to support the Neighbourhood Watch hub project, which continues to be successful within our towns and villages.

£111,000	Criminal Justice Liaison
£27,375	Arrest Referral (until 31 December only)
£10,000	Community Safety Partnership
£76,000	Youth Justice crime prevention
£20,000	Walsall Neighbourhood Watch

Community Development

The Community Associations (CAs) continue to deliver activity that supports priorities of the Walsall Plan and, at the same time, they are receiving appropriate infrastructure support so that they are sustainable.

The Community Network meetings are essential in maximizing funding opportunities and transferring learning across the borough and this has proven particularly beneficial in identifying new projects for social mixing and easing segregation as part of the Walsall for All programme. Some CAs lead on integration projects and therefore have started to attract new residents and new communities, which is important for our future community cohesion. As part of this work, some more difficult conversations around tackling prejudice and hate crime have also started to take place. The Chair of the CA Network has been a leading personality in this important agenda.

Refurbishment of CA centres continued throughout 2019 through funding from the Disabled Facilities Grant. The improvements have included making entrances accessible, installing disabled toilets and making kitchens wheelchair friendly. The feedback from users has been extremely positive and has resulted in an increase in attendance.

During 2019 the activities, projects and events funded through Community Development benefitted over 20,000 residents, however the overall number of users to community associations continues to increase each year. Organisations are diversifying the activities that they are delivering depending on the needs to local residents, e.g. Ryecroft Community Hub working in partnership with Rethink to set up a men's shed project, and Frank F Harrison Community Association trialling a variety of community activities to engage with the residents in New Invention.

The community association staff, volunteers and board members are all passionate within the communities they work in, they are delivering fantastic work and there are so many stories of the above and beyond work that they do.

Council's Equality and Diversity service

The Council continues to have a central Equality and Diversity service that, together with the Corporate Equality Group, ensures compliance with Public Sector Equality Duty. We have increased our compliance with Equality Impact Assessments on all key decisions approved by CMT/Cabinet and Council. We are strengthening this process through our Proud Programme. The E&D training we deliver to our staff and, in some cases to key partner organisations, has expanded from e-learning to innovative face to face delivery, including Equally Yours, Unconscious Bias and inter-cultural topics. We are half-way through our target of training 200 managers in these new areas. Our Interpretation, Translation, Transcription and Easy Read service supports 2,777 residents with their communication needs. Many of these are linked to the Proud Programme.

Walsall People Project

Following successful applications to MHCLG since 2018, **Walsall People's Project** has been our flagship project funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), designed to ease impact of migration on local areas. In Walsall, we saw it as a positive opportunity to establish good neighbourhood relations ranging from making our residents aware of their rights and responsibilities, for example, in terms of correct recycling and waste collection, to raising education standards for children and adults in areas of high need.

Amongst our achievements are:

Linking with community associations in bringing families and children together on positive extracurricular activity and tackling prejudice.

Preparing our residents for a smooth Brexit, explaining their rights and responsibilities and advice on their status, dealing with 560 clients every month.

Keeping our areas cleaner through the 'Good Citizen' campaign reaching to 1300 residents, achieving 16 multiagency or community visits (Community Safety, Environmental, Street Clean-Ups, identifying and dealing with hot spots).

Tackling rogue landlords and raising housing standards in hot spot areas. 170 properties have been visited and 13 referrals made. Areas visited are Palfrey, Pleck, Paddock, Birchills and Leamore.

71 families gained access to early years/schools and avoided school truancy.

Gathering intelligence on emerging European communities including Roma, and helping to ease integration with settled communities, providing better understanding of local needs for both groups.

Bringing residents from different walks of life and backgrounds together, for example 974 people registered for events such as Halloween for Families, Saint Nicholas, International Roma Day and Football Cohesion Festival. This is without taking into account involvement of family members and children.

English as a Second Language (ESOL) Focus

Our Community Cohesion team were particularly successful in gaining further funding for English as a Second Language, after the launch of **Let's Talk About It in 2018**. Initially, new ESOL provision was created in 4 different geographical locations in Walsall with 260 new learners on the course of 2018/19. Since summer 2019, ESOL went from strength to strength. Examples of all the stakeholders now involved include:

11 primary schools and 1 secondary academy expressed an interest in setting up a local ESOL provision for parents due to start from January 2020 (2 started already in November 2019).

Accord Housing Association, Willenhall Gurdwara and Willenhall Police Station, Nash Dom CIC, Dar-Us-Sunnah Madani Trust, YMCA and 2 private businesses have all started delivering.

Discussions about future ESOL provision are taking place with Gecko Programme, Bridle Court and Willenhall Job Centres and many others.

In future, we would like to get more places of worship involved, seek more qualified teachers as well as volunteers, help our providers to gain accreditations for ESOL and get more children and adults to attend, as we know the demand is very high if we set this against our monitoring of community languages at Walsall schools and interpretation services used locally.

Walsall for All Programme

Following the recognition of our approach to community cohesion, Walsall continues to be an integration area, working with government on shaping the National Integration Strategy. We launched and published our integration strategy under the banner of Walsall for All in January 2019 and have set up a range of projects under 4 priorities that are now in delivery stage and visible to our public through the very successful communication <https://www.walsallforall.co.uk>.

As part of this programme, we have become nationally recognised for our approach to cohesion and integration, sharing our learning in conferences and national forums,

reaching out to 11 government departments and Whitehall. It has been suggested (subject to new government) that we continue this programme beyond 2021, supporting the government on national roll-out.

Our achievements include:

Improving inclusion and integration practices of our voluntary sector organisations through the Walsall for All Pledge.

Training local volunteers in grass root research helping to identify how to achieve better community cohesion in future.

Launching the new Community Dialogue in 96 locations from January 2020 with the aim of creating a culture of mutual understanding between different communities living in Walsall.

A range of projects for young people focusing on British values and also changing curriculum at our schools to include Rights and Respect learning from UNICEF.

Weekly arts projects for residents and schools, getting them to open up about cultural issues that matter to them.

New Places of Welcome for our residents in many different locations in the borough.

Welcome Packs for newly settled communities, aiming at safe neighbourhoods and positive relationships.

A review of housing strategy, focusing on opportunities for integration through design and planning.

Sport & Leisure

In Sport & Leisure the facilities have again performed very well. Led by the Active Living Centres at Oak Park and Bloxwich as well as continued growth at Walsall Gala, the combined income of the 4 facilities is projecting a £165k growth on last year, with Service Area income to exceed a record high of £4.4m in the 2019/20 financial year.

Membership growth continues and our direct debit income has reached record levels with over 6,800 customers now paying by this method. To put that in context, before the development of the Active Living Centres, our member count stood at 2,400. To aid accessibility, direct debit is not the only way to pay, and “pay as you play” visits contribute greatly to annual attendances well in excess of 2 million visits.

In our quest to get *“more people, more active, more often”* and to help improve the mental and physical health and well-being of Walsall’s residents, it is fantastic news that 1,750 of our monthly members are part of our ‘Move-It’ discount scheme. Move-it offers reduced membership fees for those most in need and 10,000 of our hardest to reach residents access the Move-It scheme on a discounted pay as you play basis, with 50% of these people coming from either low income households or having a medical condition that benefits from physical activity.

We now have more than 2,600 children enrolled on our Walsall Swim Academy, which is delivered in partnership with the Walsall-based Swimming Teachers Association. Also 40 of the borough’s primary and special schools use our facilities for their swimming provision. The delivery of weekly lessons to Walsall children, provides both a crucial life-skill and also encourages a habit of regular participation.

It proves that where the Council can be bold and to commit to schemes that cut across various agendas (health, children’s, adults and regeneration), that these projects can make a genuine contribution to enriching lives.

2019 has seen considerable technological advancements within our leisure facilities. On-line booking and joining systems have made services easier for residents to access, and an interactive parents' portal for our Swim Academy has improved satisfaction and retention. The technology focus for 2020 is further developing our digital marketing presence, and the installation of market leading virtual instructor systems for studio cycling and group exercise.

The Outdoor Pursuits Service has not been able to achieve a zero-cost budget position as required by the 2015/16 budget. Following a period of public consultation an alternative operating model is being proposed which will see continuation of the activities delivered at Sneyd Watersports Centre and the Aldridge Airport Outdoor & Environmental Education Centre.

Walsall Arena & Arts

Forest Arts Centre is in the process of rebranding to Walsall Arena and Arts Centre (WAaAC). This will help raise the centre's profile onto a larger scale, hopefully, attracting higher profile performers to Walsall. Increased commercialism continues to generate income to offset the already reduced revenue subsidy. WAaAC is providing a wide variety of shows and entertainments including television comedians Ed Byrne, Henning Wehn, Milton Jones and raconteur Gyles Brandreth. Music concerts from One Night in Dublin to the internationally regarded "popera" group G4. WAaAC continues to host high quality contemporary dance in partnership with the Black Country Dance Hub. WAaAC will continue to raise pride and profile for the town through its provision of top quality performing arts.

The Walsall Education Music Hub works in partnership with Walsall Arena and Arts Centre. Support is provided for in school music and large scale after/outside school music and activities. Over 28,000 music lessons have gone into Walsall schools with an additional 15,000 lessons at Walsall Arena and Arts Centre. The Music Hub has secured another years funding for 2020/21, bringing close to £500,000 into the borough to support children's musical education. Walsall school children staged four nights of sell out concerts in the Arena for their massed choirs Christmas shows.

The New Art Gallery Walsall 2019

During the year the New Art Gallery Walsall has hosted various community events including Vaisakhi, Diwali, and Pride. The 4 Sikh temples in Walsall celebrated the 550th birthday of the Sikh Guru Nanak in November, the celebration was hosted at the Gallery and attended by multi faith representatives. The Gallery also held an event to celebrate International Women's Day.

The Collections Curator coordinated a series of events targeting adults as part of the 2019 Collections programme, encouraging wellbeing through participation. 'Sketching Sundays' (1st Sunday of the month) attract a regular audience of 10-15 people. And 'Feelgood Fridays' 2nd Friday of the month offers a range of opportunities, from Behind the Scenes tours, Curator's talks, Dance performances with sketching movement workshops and Mindful Drawing. There is also consistent provision for those living with Dementia and Visual Impairments.

Working with Creative Health, the Gallery is a major partner in the Createspace project encouraging older adults to make space in their daily lives for art – project launched in July with fully booked sessions beginning in the Autumn.

The Gallery regularly offers its facilities to other groups and other organisations. We regularly host the Princes Trust, Young Writers Group, Time to Write Adult Group, Walsall Society of Artists. Some of the other partnership events held at the Gallery this year include The Swing Charity (for bereaved children workshops), NSPCC, Walsall College, Fostering Fortnight, Surestart, the Cultural Education Partnership and TATE.

We are growing our education offer and now regularly deliver Arts Awards accredited workshops to Home Educated Children. We are also delivering the Schools Link Programme and this is continuing to grow in number.

Our exhibitions included Alan Kane, '4 Bed Detached Home of Metal' as part of region wide Home of Metal season, included 14 artists and 6 metal fans from the region and Amalia Pica including development of dance performance with Walsall College, will become a film by Rafael Ortega. 'Too Rich a Soil', Floor 4 exhibition in collaboration with Grain with three British Asian artists, 2 of which have been supported to create new work (both based in the region).

We also continue to programme our Studio through our Artist development stream including, University of Wolverhampton and Engine programme.

Lichfield Street Hub

The Lichfield Street Hub (Central Library & Archives) has had a busy 12 months. The building was handed back to the service from the contractors Willmott Dixon on Friday 4 January 2019. Lichfield Street Hub re-opened on Monday 28 January 2019 following its refurbishment, the momentum and main focus has been to maintain a good facility in the centre of town. We have also aimed to incorporate additional facilities such as Local History Centre & Archive to broaden the attraction.

Our recent refurbishment has allowed us to invest in, accommodate and cater for all service users. We have increased access to computer facilities and digital skills, as they are increasingly in demand by the public.

The Archives opened to the public on 30 April 2019 (3 days a week), the facility has improved the storage of the archives and local studies collections. There is increased demand for photos and plans/maps therefore we are looking at sourcing HLF funds to help and assisting with the digitalisation of the 12,000 photos, 5796 duplicate slides, 6504 negatives and around 22,000 Building plans c.1870-1965. We are looking to review the staffing situation in order to be able to open the Archives 5 days a week and to get accreditation from The National Archives.

We have the official opening scheduled on 22 January 2020 by a VIP through the West Midlands Lieutenancy Office.

Bereavement & Registration

The Council's Register Office submitted its Annual Performance Report to the General Register Office in April 2019. I am pleased to report that the General Register Office

confirmed that the Register Office continues to be a high performing district in terms of performance against the Key Performance Targets, Indicators and national standards.

The Register Office is now offering the EU Settlement Scheme which allows European nationals living in the UK to apply for settled status. This scheme will be available until 31 December 2020.

There has recently been a change in legislation resulting in the publication of the Civil Partnership (opposite sex couples) Regulations 2019 which means that the Register Office can now offer Opposite Sex Civil Partnerships. This enhances the range of choices for formalising partnerships available to our residents.

In April Bereavement Services facilitated another successful Sha'ban event for members of the Muslim community. This event entails a gathering of community members at Streetly Cemetery after sunset to carry out a full evening of prayers for their departed loved ones. This is an annual event and the Bereavement Services team work closely with representatives from the community to make sure the event proceeds smoothly each time.

In October Steve Billings, a long standing member of the Bereavement & Registration Services team, retired. He had served the council for well over 30 years and we wish him well in his retirement. Christine Walker-Kelley is now acting as the Interim Bereavement & Registration Services Manager.

As I am sure Members will remember, last year I stipulated that I would be looking to make significant investment in the cemeteries and crematorium. The projects I described were included in the 2019/20 Capital and I am pleased to report that some of the work has been completed, such as the installation of air conditioning and a new boundary fence at Streetly Crematorium. Other projects, such as the refurbishment of the Streetly Crematorium toilets and the Willenhall Lawn Cemetery extension, are underway as I speak.

21st Century Information & Skills

2019 has been a year of ongoing changes across library services in Walsall. In March 2019 the much awaited new Library Management System, Capita "Soprano" went live, delivering an altogether more modern, intuitive and visually appealing public service for library users, both online and at library helpdesks. It also provides opportunities for more detailed performance information and analysis to inform future planning.

Despite further book fund reductions, Walsall's libraries continue to perform against regional and national trends, with issues in the first half of 2019-20 5% up on the same period last year. The issues at the District Libraries and Streetly Community Library alone were 2% higher than last year and 4% higher than two years ago, so demonstrating a pattern of growth.

The People's Network public PCs in libraries continue to play an important part in providing free and safe access to ICT in the community and a means of supporting and enabling functional digital skills amongst residents, so as to facilitate the desired channel shift of Council's digital transformation programme. Walsall Community College have again this year delivered ICT basic courses at libraries across the Borough.

To encourage take-up of ICT and developing necessary digital skills, libraries provide a range of digital resources that can provide an attractive driver for learning. From 1 December 2019, Find My Past has been added to the range of digital resources available at every library, complementing the very popular Ancestry Library edition already provided.

In October Walsall joined our Black Country partners at Sandwell and Wolverhampton by introducing an e-books and e-audiobooks service via a single app from BorrowBox, the market leader nationally in e-books and e-audio. By joining with Sandwell and Wolverhampton, this means that in addition to titles purchased by each individual library service, librarycard-holders in each authority can access and borrow titles from the combined range of stock purchased by all three services, so providing better value for money for our residents.

All 89 public PCs in the District Libraries and Streetly Community Library will shortly be replaced with the same up-to-date equipment as at the Hub. The new PCs will also help with the goal of expanding the Code Clubs at all sites, encouraging development of coding skills for young people. A new Code Club launched this year at Willenhall Library, to join the established library Code Club at Aldridge.

A procurement process has also been embarked on with the aim of replacing the ten-year-old RFID Self-Issue machines at all sites by Spring 2020.

All District Libraries and Streetly Community Library now deliver Rhyme Time as their standard offer. Rhyme Time nationally is recognised as supporting toddlers in speech development and social awareness, and addressing social isolation for parents.

The 2019 Summer Reading Challenge was on a “Space Chase” theme. The Reading Challenge is important in helping to keep up children’s reading levels over the summer holiday period and attracted some 2,173 children from across the Borough – an 18% increase on 2018.

Owing to insurmountable implementation issues, the proposed OpenPlus access system did not go ahead as planned this year. On the basis of Open Plus, a saving of £143,000 was budgeted for. To minimise the impact on services to residents, this saving will now be achieved by ending the Sunday opening at the district libraries. The Sunday opening has not proved as successful as had been anticipated since the introduction in January 2018 and will cease from the first week of January 2020. However, the overall opening hours will not be reduced but incorporated into the rest of the week, to enhance available opening during weekdays.

Walsall Leather Museum

The Leather Museum has seen several months of ongoing growth in take-up this year, its April-November visitor figures showing a 9% increase on the same period last year, at 24,150. This reflects an increase in school and home-education visits, up 126%. It also reflects an active push by the museum to engage with coach operators to include the museum on their itineraries and so grow the more lucrative adult visitor market. A new offer for this market, including both tour and refreshments, has proved particularly successful.

Significant work has been done in addition on the museum shop in terms of range of items and its layout, as well as some changes to pricing. The overall result has been a 41% year-on-year increase in income for the museum in the period April to November, demonstrating a marked increase in spend per visitor. This is planned to increase over the coming year as work is in hand to develop an enhanced coffee-shop offer.

Linked to these changes, the Leather Museum was successful in August in applying to the West Midlands Museum Development Agency for places on the national Audience Champions Programme, to help equip managers in audience development and better use of audience data for the planning process.

The Leather Museum was also successful in its bid to the West Midlands Museum Development Agency to be part of its “Expert Eye” programme to tap into specialist expertise to tell the hidden stories behind museum objects and so create a more compelling display. The museum learned that a set of small locks in its care are actually asylum locks with quite specialist purposes, manufactured in Walsall for asylums around the country. As such they will form part of the developing “Made in Walsall” concept to celebrate Walsall’s “Town of 100 Trades” heritage.

The museum’s annual exhibition programme began 2019 with an extension of its popular Wicked Walsall exhibition, delving into the darker side of Walsall’s history, and utilising some of the weird and wonderful artefacts from the Museum’s stored collections.

The “Summer Holiday!” employed vintage, mid-20th-century fashion, swimwear, artefacts and images for a nostalgic look back at the traditional British summer holiday,

The current exhibition to end the year provides a fascinating selection of wonderful mid-century costume, cosmetics and haberdashery from the museum’s nationally significant Hodson Shop Collection.

Councillor G Perry
Portfolio Holder for Community Leisure and Culture

24 December 2019