

Council – 13 April 2015

Community, Leisure and Culture

Progress Report of Councillor Hussain, Portfolio Holder

My Portfolio is responsible for a number of services vital to the quality of life of residents throughout the borough including Area Partnerships and community development, community safety, sport and leisure, bereavement services, libraries, heritage and arts, management and maintenance of parks and open spaces, regulatory services and Walsall Adult and Community College.

The new £24m Active Living Centres are currently under construction at Oak Park and Bloxwich. This is a major step forward towards delivering the Council's aspiration to get "more people, more active, more often". Work on The £1m Gala Baths improvement project is due to commence shortly with completion anticipated by the summer holiday period. We now have 10,000 "Move-It" memberships with the Council's leisure centres aimed to at giving inactive people the incentive to exercise more.

Cabinet recently gave its support to the development of community hubs aimed at providing the services communities need, where they need them and in the way that they need them and work has already started on wide ranging engagement to help us with this. The two 'hub' pilots at Moxley and Ryecroft have been evaluated and the learning from these will support the proposal to create these hubs. Area Partnerships continue to bring together agencies and communities at a local level to resolve local issues. Development of these Partnerships continues, with consideration of Ward forums being established to ensure decision making is devolved to our communities. The development of Area Partnerships and community hubs are key flagship policies for our administration and for me personally as Portfolio Holder.

I am pleased to have led on delivering an extended burials service for Walsall residents that now allows evening burials at Streetly Cemetery during the summer months. I organised a successful meeting with the Coroner in February to promote awareness about his role, and that of the Council and the medical profession, following the death of a resident in the borough.

Libraries continue to work to develop closer working with community organisations to enhance the local delivery of services. A new partnership has been developed with Old Hall People's Partnership which will deliver community run book loan services for residents in Bentley from the Partnership's building in Wing Close. I view this plan as a model for the development of similar community partnerships to provide local access to book loan facilities.

In 2014, the New Art Gallery celebrated the 40th anniversary of The Garman Ryan Collection opening in Walsall with an exhibition incorporating many items from the Epstein Archive. The Gallery has received a grant of almost half a million pounds from the Arts Council to improve systems and infrastructure vital to its successful operation which will both reduce operating costs and improve income generation facilities.

Walsall Leather Museum received full Accreditation from the Arts Council in March 2015 and was also awarded the Sandford Award for its educational work. The assessor described the Leather Museum as `inspiring`. It has also become the first attraction in Walsall to receive a `Certificate of Excellence` on Trip Advisor and is consistently ranked in the top 5% of `Things to Do` in the West Midlands. I am keen to build on this success and, to this end, am pleased that a proposal for a new Heritage Centre has been included in the recently approved Capital Programme.

The public programme at Forest Arts Centre continues to offer a diverse range of theatre, concerts, films, shows, exhibitions and workshops attracting enterprising performances and capacity audiences in the process. Visitor numbers have now progressed beyond 160,000 annually and the numbers of people of all ages participating in the community programme for arts-making continue to grow.

We held a World War 1 commemorative parade and event at Walsall town hall in August. The Local History Centre was involved with the commemoration of the outbreak of the war including an interview for the BBC First World War Roadshow. We have also unveiled two Victoria Cross paving stones, for John Carless at St Mary's School and Gus Bonner at Aldridge, commemorating the brave actions of two of the Borough's most notable servicemen. Poppy sowing and planting to commemorate the War's 100th anniversary took place at Barr Beacon, Clayhanger, King George V playing fields, Kings Hill Park and Walsall Arboretum involving Friends groups and local communities.

Turning to community safety the Council is working with other Black Country Councils on the implementation of a cross boundary car cruising ban which has helped several areas where this has been an issue for a long time. Community safety funding has been used to help put in place a Domestic Abuse Coordinator and Child Sexual Exploitation Coordinator which will both have important roles to play in tackling these issues.

The introduction of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act, encompassing issues such as child sexual exploitation and human trafficking, places fresh demands on the Council but also presents it with opportunities. The Home Office have designated Walsall a 'Priority Area' which means the Borough will receive financial support to meet the challenges of supporting our most vulnerable communities. Over the coming months we will develop projects and activities with our communities designed to address their concerns.

The Local History Centre supported the Darlaston youth club hijab project. This trained a group of young Muslim women who interviewed second and third generation Muslim women about attitudes to wearing the hijab pre and post 9/11. The group produced a film and DVD about wearing the hijab, bullying and mental health issues as well as the interviews.

Last year the environmental health service responded to 15,000 requests for assistance with regard to matters posing a threat to the health of the Borough's residents, workers and visitors. The breadth of this work ranged from rat infestations, unsafe food, infectious diseases, dangerous work practices, noise nuisance and

hazardous accumulations. As a key link between health and economy the service supported over 1,000 businesses with visits to ensure they complied with regulations and were working in a safe and effective way. Despite this there were traders and residents who breached the law and were subject to robust enforcement action including closure of unsafe businesses, seizure of equipment and prosecution for noise nuisance and fly tipping. Over 250 formal enforcement actions have been taken with a significant number of cases still in the legal system awaiting judgement and sentencing. The service has also worked with Public Health on a number of initiatives designed to improve the health of residents in terms of obesity, the effects of tobacco products and healthy workplaces.

There has been a rise in the quantity of illicit tobacco being sold in the Borough. Officers have seized significant quantities of such products with the assistance of specially trained sniffer dogs. Licensing enforcement officers have worked in partnership with the police on a range of issues affecting the taxi and private hire trades, including supporting them in investigations involving child sexual exploitation.

Last month the Walsall Arboretum Visitor Centre was completed on time and within budget. This impressive building which will incorporate a new cafe will be a major addition to the park's attractions. The landscape works to the Green will be completed during the summer. The introduction of feature lighting in the park is progressing well and is scheduled to be ready for use in the autumn. This will complete the £7.6 million refurbishment of this premier park which will pave the way for the achievement of Green Flag status.

Over the past year Green Flag awards were retained at Palfrey Park, Willenhall Memorial Park, Merrions Wood and Rough Wood and Bentley Haye.

We secured over £160,000 from the Landfill Tax to build a new skate park at Rushall Park and have allocated £80,000 funding towards a similar scheme at Clayhanger Park.

Our commitments towards achieving healthy communities and vibrant green spaces have been further demonstrated by improvements at various allotments, Blackwood Park, Broadway West playing fields, Doe Bank Park, George Rose Park, High Heath Park, Holland Park, King George V playing fields, Palfrey Park, Reedswood Park, Shelfield Park and Willenhall Memorial Park.

Over 3,800 people attended the fifth 'Bands on the Beacon' live music event at Barr Beacon last year. This year's event is scheduled to take place over 2 days on the 27th and 28th June.

Turning to the Walsall Adult and Community College we have delivered more than 10,000 learning opportunities in Walsall the vast majority of which were delivered in the most deprived wards in the borough. The college has developed new and successful learning pathways particularly in apprenticeships and traineeships such as digital engineering and horticulture. Many of our learners progress towards work and self-employment. The College is preparing itself to become independent of the council.

Continued investment in the Community, Leisure and Culture Portfolio is important to making Walsall a great place to live, work and play. This of course is becoming increasingly difficult because of the unprecedented financial restraint we face but, nevertheless, the performance of my services continues to be of the highest standard. Last year was a very successful one and I am sure that this will continue over the next 12 months and beyond.

Councillor K Hussain
Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Culture
April 2015