

Council – 15 July 2019

Leader of the Council report

I am proud to present my report to the first ordinary meeting of the Council in 2019. This report sets out the economic and financial challenges that we face and how we will meet them. I remain as ever committed to open and transparent governance and so during the course of the municipal year, regular reports will be made by cabinet members on the key issues outlined in this report.

Economic Context

I write this report against a backdrop of continuing economic uncertainty, at local and national level. We await confirmation of the 'Fairer Funding Formula' nationally for local authorities, which is expected to be introduced as part of, or following, the next Spending Review to cover the period from 2020/21 onwards. This is expected to significantly impact on our funding, along with the impact on Walsall businesses pending Brexit negotiations. The retail sector in particular is undergoing a turbulent time as spending patterns shift and 'online' retailing presents a challenge to the traditional shopping experience, with the closure of a number of retail outlets in the town centre. My administration will be developing a Walsall Town Centre Masterplan to seek to secure a brighter future for our town. We can be proud of the many great developments we have seen over the past few years – for example, the regeneration of the Waterfront. However there is work still to do, and we need to consider how the town centre might develop further in light of ever changing market conditions.

Finance

The Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Autumn Budget 2018 stated that debt was still too high, and it was vital that the Government continues to control public spending and improve the productivity of public bodies and services. This reiterates the Government's intention to seek to continue to reduce the structural deficit and pay down the national debt. The Prime Minister has on a number of occasions credited Local Government with being the most effective part of the public sector in responding to the 'austerity' measures. Walsall Council has faced many challenges and responded well although some difficult decisions have had to be made to manage those financial challenges. Some of these decisions were not easy to do and not popular with our residents but have resulted in Walsall being in good financial health with a sustainable future.

Between 2010/11 and 2019/20, Walsall has lost c£108m in funding from Central Government. Alongside cost pressures over the same period, savings of c£192m have had to be identified and implemented. There continue to be cost pressures in areas such as Children's Services and Adult Social Care both due to increased demand and changes in demographics. This is a pressure not only for Walsall, but for Local Government as a whole and it is imperative that a fair, sustainable national funding solution is arrived at to ensure that councils can continue to protect their most vulnerable residents. I will maintain the priority given to these areas of work. In doing

so, the Council has invested £23m in Children' Services over the last 5 years and we will commit an additional £5m investment over the next 2 years.

I also attach high priority to the care of older people. Legal requirements and care practices mean that more people require increasingly complex care packages for longer periods of time, working largely with private sector providers. The increases in the National Minimum Wage have also put additional pressure on this sector as providers had to increase pay which was then passed on to the Council. Adult Social Care has seen investment of £36m over the last 5 years with a further £10m investment planned for over the next 2 years.

However, important as these areas are, I have to remind everyone that we represent all of the people of Walsall and for many having decent housing, decent roads, emptying bins, having well maintained open spaces, and a clean environment is really important too. The right balance needs to be struck, particularly as I develop Walsall's offer to new businesses and communities.

Regional Arrangements

The Association of Black Country Authorities (ABCA) continues to provide the forum for Council Leaders and Chief Executives to co-ordinate political and managerial activity of common interest.

Following guidance issued by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government requiring that all LEPs have a single accountable body in place and given the success of Walsall Council's role as Accountable Body for the Growth Deal and its associated Assurance Framework, in October 2018 the Black Country LEP confirmed acceptance of Walsall Council as its Single Accountable Body for all of its funds. This means that the Council will be accountable for funds up to £659m (2015-2037), with significant financial investment benefits to the Walsall borough – for example, £57m of Local Growth Funding has been approved so far to deliver a range of housing, job creation and transport initiatives.

Transformation and Digital

As Leader it is my aspiration for Walsall to be a place where employees are Proud to work, where residents are Proud to live, and where businesses are Proud to operate. To achieve this, we are implementing the Walsall Proud Programme.

This three-year plan will transform the council into a focused, sustainable and agile organisation that will face head-on the multiple challenges ahead, meet the needs of current and future communities, and promote Walsall on a regional, national and international level.

The Proud Programme is being undertaken across the whole organisation and is aligned to our medium-term financial strategy. It will achieve a better customer experience, increased employee satisfaction and engagement, and improved service efficiency and performance.

We need to enhance or challenge everything we do, on personal, service and directorate levels, including how we think, make decisions, spend, charge, deal with customers, listen, communicate, and work together.

To achieve the Programme's goals and create a council fit for the future, the council is working with PwC to look at what we do and develop approaches and innovations. We have developed new ways of thinking and ideas for new ways of working, and are looking at how we can realise the benefits of investment in modern technology. These is already delivering results. We have also commenced work in six Workstreams with many projects already underway. The first phase of the Proud Programme is looking at aspects of our operation such as how teams work, our third party spend, and income generation and cost recovery.

In relation to our Service Level and Productivity Workstream, we are currently implementing the Perform+ process in Money Home Job, Human Resources and Adult Social Care. This people-centered approach helps build capability and create capacity by enabling teams to effectively share good practice, improve communications and solve problems, and we are already receiving some very positive feedback.

Technology is really important to support the council in delivering this transformational agenda. ICT has refreshed equipment which officers use, providing them will lightweight mobile devices, which together with Microsoft Office 365 enables agile and flexible working and capabilities which improve how we work. We are also in the process of establishing our Digital Centre of Excellence. This will help us realise our Digital by Design ambition for the benefit of customers, employees and stakeholders.

The council's corporate communications team is proactive in the release of information regarding developments and the delivery of services that in addition to being sent to the media are added to the council's web page. A dedicated news page will soon be added to the council's website, providing customers with news directly from the council that does not rely on media outlets publication, increasing customer access to information. We are also reviewing our approach to communications, marketing and branding as part of our change programme as recognise the importance of communications in keeping customers and communities informed.

The measures that are monitored to track delivery of Corporate Plan priorities and outcomes have been refreshed and were agreed by Cabinet in May. These measures help to track performance against our priorities and will be monitored throughout the year.

Manifesto Pledges

My administration pledged a number of things to the people of Walsall and they have put their faith in us to see them through. We will not let them down.

I am pleased to confirm we have already seen through a number of those commitments.

We have put our brown bin collections back to fortnightly collections.

We have already agreed to levy the maximum fines possible for a range of environment crimes such as fly tipping, littering, dog fouling.

And I can commit that this administration will ensure all district centre car parks will remain free, to support the vibrancy of our vital district centres.

But there is much more to do.

My administration makes things happen. So we have a busy year ahead

I wanted to take this opportunity tonight to set out what residents should expect over the coming year..

1. Fly-tipping, enforcement and derelict sites

My administration will continue to make cracking down on environmental crime a key priority.

We will bring a paper to Cabinet in **September 2019** this will set out:

1. The results of the fly-tipping trials we put in place last municipal year (free-bulky collections; skip days; extended opening of tips)
2. Costed plans to ensure our tips are open 7 days a week reflecting resident expectations
3. Costed plans to ensure we can offer free bulky collections to residents
4. An action plan to tackle the top 10 derelict sites in the borough (judged against our Planning Enforcement Plan)

We will ensure that we levy the maximum fines on those caught bringing blight to our communities, as agreed by Cabinet in March 2019

2. Community Safety and working with the Police

My administration will accelerate conversations with our Police colleagues on a bespoke approach to a joint unit to make Walsall safer. Issues around Community Safety and Policing are in a period of rapid change and we will need to respond robustly to the new challenges. So we intend to agree with the Police the creation of an Integrated Team to focus on community safety, bringing together Council and police resources to provide better assurance to our communities – and enforcement of issues that blight our communities day in and day out. This new integrated team will have available to them further resources within the Council and West Midlands Police; will create a flexible model to ensure we can act swiftly and decisively together to tackle our broad community safety and community protection duties; and further partners can join us in time.

We will bring a paper to Cabinet in **October 2019** this will set out:

- The design of the new Integrated Team, taking the output of our Community Safety and Community Protection service redesign work through the Walsall Proud Programme;

- The powers that we will collectively use to make Walsall a better place;
- How Communities, including neighbourhood watch groups and other voluntary sector organisations can play their part in the new model;
- How localities will fit into this model; and
- A jointly agreed Community Safety Plan to tackle Walsall's priorities for community safety

CCTV

Supporting our Community safety agenda we will make capital funding available to increase the amount of deployable CCTV cameras. We will upgrade those static cameras in Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston, Willenhall, and the Town centre to digital, and introduce new cameras into Aldridge.

3. Cleaning up, tidying up, and greening the borough

We made a number of commitments to residents about cleaning up our streets and communities, and greening our borough.

These included a review of our grass cutting arrangements. This will be an early pledge so I have asked that a report comes to Cabinet in **July 2019** to review our current grass cutting frequencies and make recommendations for costed proposals to improve these. This same Cabinet will also consider proposals for extra investment into our Tree team to ensure we can inspect many more highways trees across the borough and address the concerns many residents and Councillors express about them.

Through our Voluntary sector coordinator in Clean & Green, we will immediately ensure we step up efforts on joint action in our communities so we maximise the effectiveness of Council and volunteer resources. Using a modest Government grant in March 2019 (High Street Community Clean Up Fund) we purchased high visibility jackets, litter pickers and other equipment to supply local groups and volunteers, working with One Walsall. We have also signed up over 100 local businesses to our litter charter and plan to see many more make similar commitments to clear outside of their premises right across the borough.

Further, we will work with Local Community Groups to identify appropriate additional locations and secure funding to develop "pocket parks" in our urban spaces. Green spaces offer a sanctuary away from the hustle and bustle of life, to relax, keep healthy, learn about nature or spend quality time together.

Cabinet in September 2019 will receive a paper to consider costed plans for more frequent Council street cleansing, together with consideration of how this Council can play its part in reducing the use of single use plastics .

Cabinet in November 2019 will consider our overall waste strategy for the borough, in line with Government's waste strategy and in line with the Walsall Proud Programme commitment to consider service levels, expectations and service models. This will include future provision of Household Waste Recycling Centres in the Borough, Transfer Station, and our collection and disposal arrangements.

4. Town Centre and car parking

This administration recognised the challenges facing Walsall Town Centre and took bold steps to commission the preparation of a Masterplan for Walsall Town Centre. This work is in its final stages and will be presented to Cabinet in **July 2019** for adoption. This will include our commitment to ensure high quality and accessible public toilets in our town centre.

Alongside the Masterplan, officers have been asked to bring a costed action plan for its first 6 months, to clean up the town, bring extra assurance to visitors, and ensure we follow through our commitments to ensure reduced car parking charges in Council owned car parks, including a 6 month trial of 'Free on Sunday'. Finally, we will also include costed proposals for the installation of electric vehicle charging points in Council controlled car parks in Walsall. This package will be considered at the **July 2019** Cabinet meeting.

5. Repairing and maintaining our roads

We will continue our successful approach to repairing and replacing roads across the borough and matching government investment with local money.

We will bring a paper to Cabinet in **November 2019** to set out our approach; my Administration will seek to identify extra funding and enhance the approved Highways maintenance programme as published, for the benefit of the residents and businesses of Walsall. It remains our priority to use innovative technology and solutions offering good value for money.

6. Caring for the Vulnerable

In our Walsall Together plan, we have stated that it is a priority of this administration to increase the independence of our residents to improve their health so that they can make a positive contribution to their community. We therefore pledge funding of £10.1m over the next 3 years to provide appropriate aids and adaptations to people's homes so that they can live independently in their own home. This includes an 8% increase this year supporting people moving out of hospital safely and in a timely manner.

Resilient communities are key for sustainable prosperity and health to our residents. To that end we will implement an all age disability pathway; we will implement an integrated early intervention, prevention and well-being offer to support the resilience in our communities.

7. Children Youth Services

Walsall's future lies with the children and youth of today, it is our responsibility to give them the best start in life and that starts with the best possible education. We know the our school buildings need investment to provide the best learning environment, we will work closely with our local schools and academies, with head teachers, parents and MP's to get the government to make the necessary investment into our schools. We will work with the third sector to rebuild our youth services.

Alongside this we will be working with Head Teachers and our Designated Safeguarding Leads , in schools to ensure that violent crime triggers are understood by schools.

8. A Council Fit for the digital age. The Walsall Proud Programme

It is this administrations clear and unambiguous priority for the council, as an organisation to be fit for the modern digital age. We are committed to achieving better outcomes, enhancing the customer experience, increasing employee satisfaction and engagement, and improving both service efficiency and performance - Valued Services that offer Best Value to the taxpayer.

We have committed up to £26m of one off investment to achieve this on the clear understanding that every £1 of that investment must deliver £3 of recurrent savings. I will be bringing regular reports to Cabinet throughout the year on the progress of our programme.

9. The third sector

The third sector will play an integral part in creating a stronger integrated community. We have already committed to a 3 year funding agreement with One Walsall, in addition it is our intention to provide a third sector hub supporting valuable organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and One Walsall.

This is our plan for a safer stronger cleaner and greener Walsall.

Councillor M.A. Bird
Leader of the Council

5 July 2019