

Leaders Report to Full Council

1, It is with great sadness that I start my report with the untimely passing of Cllr Ann Heames who's Funeral I attended, alongside Councillors of all political persuasion, on Monday, 09th February 2015.

Ann was a stalwart presence within her Ward of Clayton, representing the residents during two spells (1988-1996 & 200-2015) totalling some twenty three years and she also held the Mayoralty during 2010-11. More recently Ann attended such committee's as the Member Development Panel (passing on her hard earned experience) and also the Grants Assessment Panel, where she was an active Member. The people of both Clayton and the Borough at large have lost a committed public servant and we must all endeavour to follow her commitment to our residents moving forward.

2, Moving to executive matters, the Administration continued to look into the Governance and Strengths of the Borough's Community Centres. It would be remiss of me not to thank Members from all sides of the Chamber for their efforts and this work was strengthened with the formation of a Cabinet Panel, complete with delegated decision making powers, to ensure that the recommendations of the Community Centre Review be implemented swiftly.

3, Cabinet also resolved to undertake a Green Space Strategy Review, another stage in the journey to completing the joint Local Plan with the City of Stoke on Trent Council. It is essential that this work continues if this Authority is to honour its commitments to the people of Newcastle under Lyme especially around sustainability, creating a Borough of Opportunity and protecting our green open spaces.

4, The establishment of a new, fit for purpose, leisure centre in Kidsgrove moved one step closer with the delivery of a feasibility report from the Chair of Active and Cohesive Scrutiny Committee. The report endorsed this Authority's insistence that the people of Kidsgrove be treated fairly by Staffordshire County Council after years of neglect, offered suggestions around possible locations, discussed possible funding options and presented a scope for the project. The inclusion of a new Kidsgrove Leisure Centre in the draft version of the new District Deal should also give local residents more certainty that this Administration will deliver on this long awaited project.

5, This Administration's continued commitment to the Living Wage strengthened when the go ahead was given by Cabinet to push for full accreditation with the Living Wage Foundation. It is straight forward why this Authority should do this, it's good for the Authority, e.g. Two thirds of employers reported a significant impact on recruitment and retention within their organisation and 70% of employers felt that the Living Wage had increased consumer awareness of their organisation's commitment to be an ethical employer.

It's good for our residents, e.g. The Living Wage affords people the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families, 75% of employees reported increases in work quality as a result of receiving the Living Wage and 50% of employees felt that the Living Wage had made them more willing to implement changes in their working practices; enabled them to require fewer concessions to effect change; and made them more likely to adopt changes more quickly.

And most importantly, it's good for our society as a whole, e.g. The causes of poverty are complex and in order to improve lives there should be a package of solutions across policy areas. The Living Wage can be part of the solution.

6, Looking to our Town Centres, the Administration moved forward with a 'preferred development partner' to realise the long standing ambition of the Ryecroft Development. By selecting a partner, we have now been able to create a Co-Operation Agreement which allows the Developer to finesse its scheme, offer best value to the public purse and engage with our partners exclusively to create the best possible outcome for the people of the Borough.

7, With the help of an Economic Development Scrutiny Committee 'Task and Finish' Group, the Administration started to look more closely at the spending of Section 136 monies, more commonly known as Concurrent Funding. Cllr Stringer presented a comprehensive report to Cabinet outlining several areas including spend, governance and monitoring amongst others. Whilst Cabinet was happy to except the majority of the recommendations, continued Central Government cuts mean that financial pressures are unfortunately having to be passed on to Parishes and tonight's budget will contain a 25% reduction in S136 grants.

It should be noted though that this is actually over 50% less percentage wise, compared to the central grant reduction passed down by the Conservative led coalition Government over the last five years, we will protect communities where Government Departments are clearly failing.

8, Suicide remains a major public health issue and is a devastating event for families and communities but present socioeconomic factors unfortunately are contributing to a surge in numbers across the Country and most shockingly within Newcastle-under-Lyme. As Leader of the Council, I've made a commitment to take the lead to reduce suicide locally.

This will be achieved through the delivery of partner helpline services, reaching out to high risk groups in communities, working with other organisations and services, and influencing public policy. Locally, this problem has manifested itself with significant numbers of people using or trying to use the Midway car park to attempt or commit suicide.

We have had to move quickly and working with partners, I'm happy to report that physical control measures have been put in place at Midway, access to a helpline provided, and a large amount of positive messaging offering support to those effected located within the Car Park.

9, Policy and Strategy continues a pace with both the Capital and Asset Management Strategies both having been confirmed by the Cabinet since the last meeting of the Full Council, the Capital Strategy coming before you all this evening for ratification. Though heavy on detail, all of these strategy documents are essential to the continued high performance of this Administration and I urge all members to study them.

10, Improvements within the Information Technology Infrastructure continue apace backed up by a new ICT Strategy replacing the previous one passed back in 2008. The aggressive Council Plan brought forward by this Administration, needs to be supported with a robust ICT Foundation and I'm pleased to support fully the many changes and improvements contained within it.

One such advance is that of the Members Digital Technology Trial. My thanks have to go to the Chair and Members of the Member Development Panel for their support throughout the process. Robust consultation, training, Members volunteering to take part all added to a very successful despite the very disappointing double standard by some members of the opposition. As well as this advance

being cost neutral, Members must embrace a modern electorate and those that do not will soon find themselves out of office.