

STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL TO FULL COUNCIL

Submitted by: Councillor Stephen Sweeney

Portfolio: All

Wards affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To provide an update to Members on the activities and decisions of Cabinet together with the Forward Plan.

Recommendation

That the statement of the Leader of the Council be received and noted.

Reasons

To update Council Members on the activities and decisions of the Cabinet and to allow questions and comments on the Statement to the relevant Portfolio Holders.

1. Background

- 1.1 Cabinet has met three times since my last report, on 18 January, 1 February and 14 March 2012. Below is a summary of actions and decisions taken along with a link to the Forward Plan. (For further background to the Cabinet's Decisions please refer to the Cabinet agendas of 18 January, 1 February and 14 March).

2. Council Tax

- 2.1 Once again the hard-working families in the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme are set to benefit from a Council Tax freeze. This is the second time the Cabinet has been able to recommend a freeze, despite opposition from the Labour Group who voted against this motion at Full Council.

3. Annual Audit Letter

- 3.1 The Audit Commission has published its Annual Audit letter on the Council's Accounts for 2010/11. The Audit Commission has issued a very positive report and comments that the Borough Council "continues to manage its finances well". It states "you have demonstrated that the Council from Members through Cabinet and the Management Team, to those delivering services, has been pro active in responding to challenges which should leave you relatively robustly positioned for the future". In my view the report would struggle to be any better.

4. Carolyn Downs Visit

On 2 March 2012 Cabinet hosted a visit by Carolyn Downs, the Chief Executive of the Local Government Association and Howard Davies, the Principal Adviser for the LGA in the West Midlands and South West. Carolyn was hugely impressed by the Borough and especially Jubilee 2. Howard was involved with Newcastle when the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition was first formed 6 years ago. He was a member of the Improvement Board

established to improve the Council's performance. He was amazed with the transformation that has occurred in Newcastle in the last six years and with the pride the Cabinet has in the Borough.

5. **Letting of Surplus Office Space**

5.1 Heads of Terms agreements for new leases have been agreed in principle with the County Council, the Police and Public Health to share accommodation in the Civic Offices and Kildgrove Town Hall.

5.2 This shared accommodation will deliver:

- Efficiency savings
- Develop new ways of working
- Improve performance
- Improve customer service

5.3 The Council is to save £265,000 pa by sharing accommodation, but equally importantly partnership working will reap huge benefits with different organisations working in the same building.

6. **Chesterton Vision**

6.1 The Borough Council and the County Council are to enter into a Service Level Agreement so that Leisure and Cultural Services staff provide the operational management at Chesterton Vision. The County Council own the building and will be responsible for any repairs; the Borough Council will manage the facility for the benefit of the people of the Borough.

7. **Town Centre**

7.1 The retail consultancy contract has been awarded to Cushman & Wakefield to market the Rycroft Development. Although not the cheapest if they fail in their attempts to secure a developer the Council only pays a third of £22,500 (which represents the Borough Council's contribution to this work).

7.2 Cabinet agreed to officers working under the auspices of the Newcastle Town Centre Partnership to prepare and submit a bid to become a 'Portas Pilot'. Up to £100,000 is available to support the establishment of 12 pilot schemes that will test the ideas in the Portas Review with the main objective being to strengthen the town centre.

8. **Forward Plan**

8.1 The Forward Plan covering the period 1 April 2012 to 31 July 2012 can be found at:

<http://www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/forwardplan>

Councillor S. Sweeney
Leader of the Council