

STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL TO FULL COUNCIL – 6th APRIL 2022

Submitted by: Councillor Simon Tagg

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 Leader and Cabinet and to allow questions and comments to be made on the Statement.

1. Cabinet Meetings

A selection of decisions and actions of the Leader and Cabinet since the last Leader's Statement are detailed below.

2. War in Ukraine

We have all been shocked by the severity of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and our hearts go out to the innocent families affected by the on-going fighting. At times like this it is heartening to see the good in our society and people pulling together to help in any way they can by providing practical support.

The Borough Council has provided 'We Stand With Ukraine' with a shop unit at 17 Merrial Street, free of charge, to use as a collection point for community donations; at times they have been overwhelmed by the generosity of local people. An appeal is also raising money to pay for the transport of supplies from Newcastle to Ukraine. Donations can be made via the 'just giving' website by searching 'We stand with Ukraine' – almost £6000 has been raised at the time of writing.

The Council will play its part in welcoming displaced Ukranian citizens to the borough, and I recently joined other Staffordshire Leaders to write to the Prime Minister and Home Secretary about our collective readiness and ability to help those fleeing the conflict.

On 14th March the Government announced its Homes for Ukraine scheme and a local authority support package to help look after the welfare of those displaced. Officers are working with County colleagues and the Staffordshire Resilience Forum to co-ordinate our response to this developing situation.

I have asked His Worshipful the Mayor to allow some time at the beginning of the meeting for Members to offer their reflections.

3. **Walleys Quarry Update**

Cabinet has received a further update on the problem of foul gas odours from Walleys Quarry impacting on our community. In 2021, the Council received a total of 22,239 complaints. This figure represents two thirds of the overall complaints for all the various environmental services contacts for that year. In the same period, the Environment Agency received 43,262 complaints about Walleys Quarry

In recent weeks complaints are once again on the increase with a clear correlation between the number of complaints received in any one week and the proportion of time that the H2S monitors record odours above the annoyance threshold. During January 2022 there were two weeks when the H2S concentrations recorded at the 4 monitoring stations were significantly elevated to the highest recorded H2S concentration since May 2021.

The UKHSA has published its latest health risk assessment and has reported that whilst H2S concentrations measured at three of the monitoring stations averaged out to be below the long term/lifetime physical health level the Galingale monitoring station remain above this level. They state that any risk to long-term (lifetime) physical health is likely to be small, however, they cannot exclude a risk to health from pollutants in the area, where exposure continues above the long-term health-based guidance value. Therefore, UKHSA continues to strongly recommend that all appropriate measures are taken to reduce the off-site odours from the landfill site.

In light of the ongoing problem the Chief Executive formally complained to the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency about the failure of the EA's regulatory action on the site. In response the Environment Agency have rejected the complaint, seemingly without undertaking any investigation to explore or test the issues raised. Cabinet has, therefore, secured the support of our local MP, Mr Arron Bell, to escalate this complaint with the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

4. **Ryecroft Blueprint**

Cabinet endorsed the Blueprint for the redevelopment of the Ryecroft site. Following the Council securing more than £11m from the Government's Future High Streets Fund, plans are now set in motion and visible signs of progress can be seen on the site with the demolition of the former Civic Offices.

Cabinet has agreed, subject to contract, to release the necessary space on Ryecroft to Aspire Housing for their new headquarters and housing development. A contractor has now been appointed for the 450 space car park fronting onto Liverpool Road and officers are discussing the feasibility of a 100 bed mid-range hotel on the centre of the site.

Cabinet has also agreed, following the purchase of the York Place shopping arcade, to appoint a contractor to review options and plan the next stage of its redevelopment.

We have now reached an early milestone on the road to the long-awaited redevelopment of the Ryecroft with the jigsaw pieces now finally falling into place. The main aim is to attract more people to live and work within the ring road to boost retail, leisure and hospitality in the town centre.

5. **Kidsgrove and Newcastle Town Deal updates**

Good progress is being made on both Town Deals to gain maximum benefit from the £43.2M Government investment in Kidsgrove and Newcastle. By 31st March further business cases will have been submitted for the Railway Station Improvement and Enhanced Canal Corridor schemes in Kidsgrove. The business case for the Shared Service Hub is scheduled for submission in June 2022.

Work is ongoing to develop the business cases for each of the Newcastle Town Deal projects, all of which are on course to be submitted to the government for appraisal by the end of June this year.

The refurbishment of Kidsgrove Sports Centre is reaching its final phase which includes a 25m, six lane swimming pool, reception area, sports hall, enlarged gym, dance studio, spin studio and physio room along with updated changing areas. The Kidsgrove Sports Centre Community Group aim to open the Sports Centre in the summer of 2022.

6. **Newcastle Sustainable Environment Strategy Annual Report**

Cabinet received the Annual Report which provided updates on the Council's commitment to a sustainable environmental future for the borough, this is the first Report of the five year plan. The Strategy's overarching aims are to reduce carbon and other damaging emissions, minimise waste and increase recycling, also off-setting residual carbon emissions. Key highlights include embedding nature recovery plans, commencing urban tree planting on 60 green spaces, investing in full electric vans for pest and dog warden services and completed the first phase of a solar thermal PV panels at Knutton Lane Depot and installation of electric vehicle charging points in car parks.

During 2020/2021 the Council reduced carbon emissions associated with its operations by 21.5% or 5.93 tonnes as we progress on our journey to be net zero by 2030.

7. **Finance and Performance Review Report Third Quarter (October to December) 2021-2022**

Cabinet reviewed the performance data for Quarter three and noted that performance across the Council remains strong, with 84% of targets being met or within tolerance.

The last Quarter of 2021 was impacted by the Omicron Covid variant which affected short term staff sickness levels but in general performance was maintained including participation in food waste collections which continued to increase, reducing the proportion of residual waste. The town centre markets held a series of successful events in the run up to Christmas which attracted shoppers to visit the town and support local businesses leading to an increase in footfall over previous years.

8. **Retiring Members and Borough Elections**

As this is the last Full Council meeting before the all-out Borough elections on 5th May, I would like to thank Members from across the Council for their support to me as Leader, and the Cabinet, during the last four years and extend my best wishes to those Members who are retiring at the end of this term.

9. **Forward Plan**

The Forward Plan can be found at:-

<https://moderngov.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/mgListPlanItems.aspx?PlanId=128&RP=118>

Councillor Simon Tagg
Leader of the Council